NO. 1 25c

DELL MYSTERY NOVELS

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL

A BUNDLE FOR THE CORONER

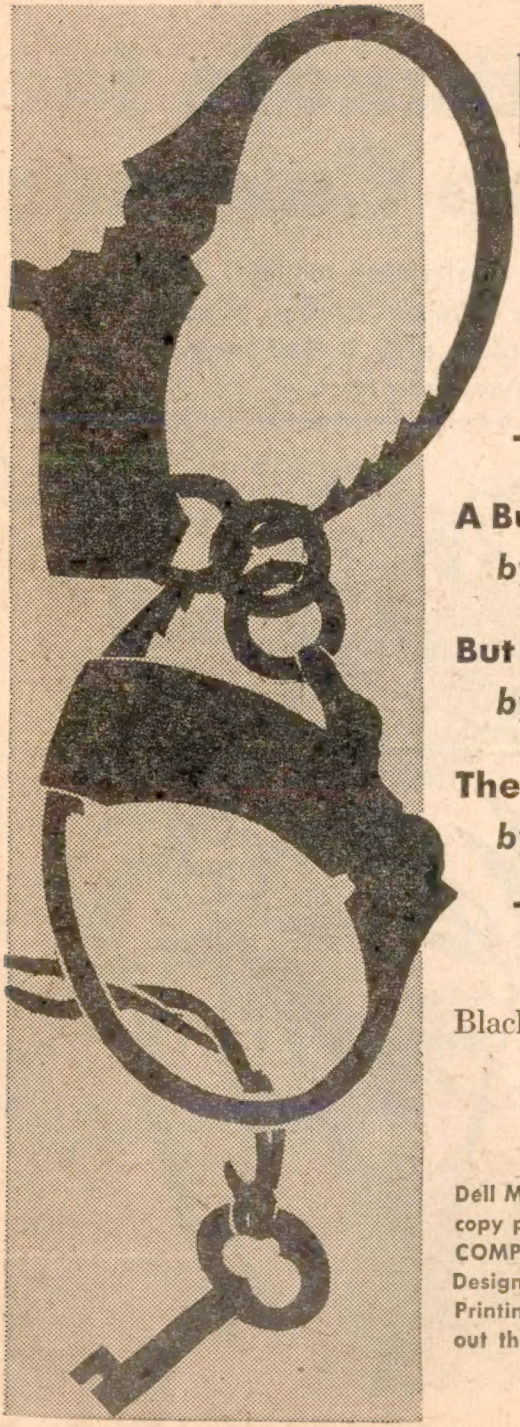
BRETT HALLIDAY

WM. CAMPBELL GAULT

BUT THE PROPHET DIED

BRUNO FISCHER

THE QUIET WOMAN



DELL MYSTERY
NOVELS

No. 1

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A Bundle for the Coroner 2
by Brett Halliday

But the Prophet Died 46
by William Campbell Gault

The Quiet Woman 102
by Bruno Fischer

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By Brett Halliday

A Bundle for the Coroner

Harboring a fugitive . . . obstructing justice . . . That would be the charge if he got caught, Mike Shayne knew. But he had to play it that way. He had to have a few hours' time . . . .

Chapter One

With a Bullet-Hole in His Belly

LUCY HAMILTON GLANCED quickly at the electric clock in her living room when the buzzer sounded downstairs. It wasn't quite nine o'clock, and Lucy frowned with pleased perplexity as she crossed the pleasant room to press the release catch on the front door of the apartment building.

Michael Shayne hadn't actually said he would drop by this evening, though he had asked her casually if she had any cognac in the larder when they left his downtown office together at five o'clock.

She hadn't really expected him, and certainly not so early as this. But she looked just right to receive an informal visitor, she assured herself with a sweeping downward glance as she turned the knob of her second-floor door and heard footsteps mounting the stairs. Michael hadn't seen this hostess gown before. It was a shimmery blue, with a tight bodice and short puffed sleeves, a flaring skirt that fell in folds

A NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVEL

from her nice hips to just touch the tips of her blue satin mules.

She fluffed one hand through the brown curls at the back of her head, and put on her most pleased smile as she waited for her redheaded employer to round the stairs onto the landing just in front of her.

Lucy Hamilton stiffened and drew back from the open doorway with a swift indrawing of breath when her visitor appeared.

It was not Shayne. It was a man she thought she had never seen before. He was tall and slender and no older than she, and wore light tan slacks and an open-throated polo shirt of sky-blue knitted cotton. A gray, snap-brim felt was tilted rakishly low over his right eye, and Lucy's first brief glimpse of his face gave an impression of dark leanness with tightly drawn flesh over prominent cheekbones that was almost pain-contorted.

She involuntarily started to swing the door shut, thinking the ring of her bell had been a mistake and the man wanted one of the other three apartments on the second floor, but hesitated with a six-inch crack as he stopped on the top step and exclaimed hoarsely:

"Hold it, Lucy. Don't you know who I am?"

She caught her lower lip between her teeth, studying him dubiously and trying to recall if she had ever heard his voice before.

Holding his right arm stiffly across his stomach and dragging his hat off awkwardly with his left hand, he essayed a reassuring smile that had in it the elements of entreaty and of fear. He stood like that, tight-lipped and with black eyes burning feverishly at her through the narrow crack, giving her an opportunity to look him over and decide for herself whether she would slam the door in his face or invite him inside.

Lucy shook her head slowly and said, "There must be some mistake. I'm Lucy Hamilton."

"I know." The words came from tight lips, clipped and impatient. "From New Orleans. I'm Jack Bristow." He paused a moment, waiting for some response, then added, "Arlene's brother."

Arlene Bristow. A girl who had worked with Lucy in New Orleans before she met Michael Shayne and became his secretary and followed him to Miami. A dark, vivid girl, with a penchant for laughter and for a bewildering succession of beaux that had caused Lucy to envy her in those days.

Yes. Arlene did have a brother. A memory came to her vaguely as she hesitated. An evening in Arlene's apartment. Just the two of them with a light supper cooked in Arlene's kitchenette and lots of girl talk.

A ring of the bell and the shambling, staggering entrance of an extremely drunken young man whom Arlene had apologetically introduced as her brother, and who had immediately made the most outrageous love to Lucy in an obnoxiously self-assured manner that had infuriated her.

Yet, there had been lonely nights after that meeting when Lucy had drearily repented her prudish withdrawal from his attempted caresses and unhappily wondered if she would ever meet him again. There had been something dashing and fascinating about the young man's assumption that any woman would be flattered to be asked to sleep

with him—not the least element of which was the undeniable fact that Lucy had secretly been flattered.

That was the only time Lucy had seen Arlene Bristow's brother. She recalled tentative attempts to find out something more about him, which Arlene had not responded to. At that time Lucy had gotten the impression that he was a weakling and a ne'er-do-well and probably best forgotten, but now he didn't look weak, and there was a remembered flutter in Lucy's stomach muscles now as the left corner of his mouth twitched upward mockingly.

"Still a virgin, Lucy?" he demanded. "And still fearful that I might persuade you to change your status?"

The challenge couldn't be disregarded. He looked sober enough, though queerly drawn and trembling as though on the verge of exhaustion. Lucy opened the door wider and stepped back, saying coldly, "Come in if you like. Is Arlene still in New Orleans?"

"Yes. Last time I heard."

He came through the door with a rush, staggering momentarily though there was no smell of liquor on his breath as he passed within a foot of Lucy. He stood in the center of the room with his back to her as she closed the door, leaning forward slightly from the hips and with his right arm still pressed stiffly against his stomach. He straightened when he heard the click of the door latch, turned and said with an effort at debonair gaiety. "Alone at last, Lucy dear. Have you had a phone call the last fifteen minutes?"

Then his black eyes glazed over and he fell face forward onto the rug. Lucy ran to him and fell on her knees beside his crumpled body. He looked patheti-

cally young and defenseless with all the color drained from his dark face when she turned him over. His arm fell away from his body and lay inert, and there was a stain of blood on the blue polo shirt just beneath the bottom ribs on his right side.

Compressing her lips and fighting back panic, Lucy pulled shirt and undershirt up from his waistband and found a small wound oozing blood in the soft flesh. She sank back on her heels for a moment, considering what doctor she might reach most quickly, and was disconcerted to see his black lashes lift and to hear his voice:

"No doctor, Lucy. For the love of God, why do you think I made it here? I'll be okay. Just let me rest a little. If I could lie down."

She started to protest, but he placed both palms flat on the floor beside him and lifted himself to a sitting position, his eyes blazing at her with determination and command.

"Put a towel on your bed and let me lie there. I promise not to bleed much. And get me a drink. I just need to rest. Then I'll go on."

He groped for her wrist and pulled himself upright and Lucy let herself be persuaded momentarily, thinking it was best to propitiate him and keep him quiet, that she would surreptitiously call a doctor as soon as he was safely in the bedroom, wondering about the note of desperation in his voice and what he had done to be afraid to have a doctor tend him.

With Jack Bristow leaning on her arm and stumbling a little, she led him into the bedroom where he sank onto the edge of the chaste single bed and shook his head stubbornly when she urged him to stretch out on the immaculate spread.

"Don' wanna cause you trouble," he mumbled. "Get towel. Lemme lie down few minutes. 'At's all."

She left him and, hurrying into the bathroom, flew back with a heavy towel which she spread out behind him. He relaxed on it with a wince of pain and then a deep sigh of relaxation. He closed his eyes but caught her wrist in a hurting grip when she tried to stand up.

"Listen to me, Lucy." Beads of sweat stood on his forehead and formed tiny rivulets down each temple. "I swear I didn't do anything wrong, but I'm in a spot where I can't have a doctor see me. Not until I get a chance to clear things up. You're the only person I know in Miami. You've got to help me. Just let me stay a couple of hours and I'll clear out. You didn't answer me about a phone call."

"I haven't had one and you're shot," she said faintly. "Probably bleeding inwardly. If you don't see a doctor . . ."

"If I do see one," he told her with a wretched attempt at a smile, "you'll always feel like Judas, Lucy. Trust me, darling." There was the old wheedling, self-assured note in his voice again. His smile became a real one, whimsical and gay.

"I'm a stranger here and you know the Miami cops. You ought to, working for Mike Shayne. You know how they look for a fall guy and once they get him quit looking for anyone else. I'm the fall guy this time. If I can just stay out of sight a few hours . . ." His fingers loosened on her wrist, the tips sliding caressingly over the flesh. "I could use a drink. And a kiss if you've got one

to spare."

He was laughing up at her quizzically, and Lucy felt a mad and almost irresistible desire to bend lower and press her mouth against his lips. She blushed hotly because the desire came to her, and turned her face away so he wouldn't see the blush and guess at its cause.

"I'll get you some brandy," she said primly, "and when Mr. Shayne comes you can tell him about it. He'll decide what to do."

She hurried out of the bedroom and to the small kitchen, stretching on tiptoe to reach a bottle of Shayne's favorite cognac from the shelf. She filled a three-ounce glass and put it on a tray with a glass of ice water, hesitated only momentarily before pouring a couple of ounces in the bottom of another glass to which she added ice cubes and tap water.

Jack Bristow was lying back with his head on the pillow and eyes lightly closed when Lucy re-entered the room. Short-cropped black hair clung to his well-shaped head in waves, and his mobile lips were slightly parted. He looked relaxed, asleep perhaps, and Lucy approached the bed on tiptoe, looking down at him doubtfully when he did not stir or open his eyes.

She set the tray on the floor and gently lifted the loose tail of shirt and undershirt to study the small wound again. No more blood came from the bullet-hole, and the red fluid that had previously oozed out was beginning to form a scab.

She drew his clothing back over the bare flesh, thinking it best not to disturb him, and debating anew whether she should call a doctor at once or hope Shayne would come soon and make the decision for her.

When she turned her head she saw Jack's eyes wide open and fixed upon her unblinkingly. "Is Mike Shayne coming here—tonight?"

"I think so. If he doesn't come soon I can call him and . . ."

"Don't." Jack's teeth were set together hard and his voice was harsh. "From what you've told Arlene in letters, she guesses you're in love with the guy. That right?"

"I don't think that concerns you."

"The hell it doesn't. I wouldn't be here if there was another soul in Miami I could have gone to."

Lucy said, "That's flattering." She rocked back on her heels and reached for the glass of straight brandy. "You wanted a drink?"

He took it from her and lifted the glass to his lips swiftly without lifting his head, spilling a few drops but coming as close to "tossing off" a drink as Lucy had ever seen accomplished.

He dropped the empty glass on the coverlet beside him and muttered, "I didn't mean anything personal. You've always been and still are the girl I'd like most to be between the sheets with. But I know all about Mike Shayne, see? Just the kind of dick he is."

"What kind of dick," asked Lucy faintly, "do you think he is?"

"He'd love to throw me to the wolves," said Jack flatly. He paused before adding, "Particularly if he found me shacked up with his—secretary." His hesitation before selecting the final word was meaningful and Lucy felt herself blushing again like a schoolgirl.

"Michael isn't like that," she declared vehemently. "As for you being 'shacked

up' with me, as you so elegantly express it, that's utter nonsense. After all, I only saw you once before in my life."

"But how'll you make him believe that? You know how a guy is when another fellow pops up out of his—secretary's past. Always ready to believe the worst. Why'll he think I came to you if I hadn't been sure you'd take me in?"

"What's all this getting us?" demanded Lucy wearily. "Tell me about it, Jack. Who shot you in the side? Why are you afraid to be examined by a doctor?"

"A dead man, believe it or not. And I told you why not to call a doctor," Jack snarled. "Because I can't afford to start explaining things to the police. Not yet. Nor to your Mike Shayne either. Get that straight, sister. If he does come and you say a word about me being here, I'll fix you with him so you'll wish you'd kept shut!"

"You're hardly in a position to threaten anyone," Lucy told him coldly. She retrieved the empty cognac glass, placed it on the tray, and stood up. "Do you want some water?"

"No. More of that brandy would be okay."

"You've had enough," she told him and started toward the door.

His voice stopped her on the threshold. It was hard and level, yet with an underlying note of desperation which warned her that he was dangerous.

"Just don't do it, Lucy girl. All I'm asking is a couple of hours, and I swear to you as God is my judge that you'll be doing nothing wrong. But I'm also warning you that Shayne wouldn't see it that way, and if you give me to him I'll smear you so you'll not only be looking for another man but for another job, too. Now close that door and get smart."

Lucy went out without looking back. She carried the tray to the kitchen and carefully rinsed out Jack's liquor glass and dried it. She emptied the ice water in the sink and took her own untouched glass of brandy and water back to the living room. The bedroom door stood open, but she noted that Jack had turned out the bedside lamp.

Biting her lip in indecision, she slowly went to the door and drew it shut, then turned back to drop into a deep chair and wrestle with her problem.

In the beginning, immediately after Jack made his absurd threat, there had been no question in her mind. Michael Shayne was certainly best qualified to decide whether or not to turn Bristow over to the police after questioning him. Shayne had his own peculiar code of ethics which she sometimes did not wholly understand, but which she respected. Often enough, she had seen him set himself squarely against the police in their efforts to jail a man whom Shayne believed innocent, and many times she had seen him go far outside the law to gain an end which he believed right.

If Jack Bristow could convince Shayne that he was innocent in whatever sort of mess he'd gotten himself mixed into, she knew positively that the big redhead would hold the man's confidence inviolate even though it involved a technical illegality on Shayne's part.

On the other hand, Lucy was in love with her employer. She admitted the fact openly to herself, and more or less openly to him. For years now she had

let herself dream of marriage, and had felt encouraged of late by the belief that he was coming more and more to put thoughts of Phyllis, his first wife, out of his mind and to allow himself to look at Lucy more and more as a woman rather than merely an attractive and competent secretary.

She knew full well what a struggle it had been for Shayne to adjust himself to losing Phyllis after possessing her for so short a time after living for years in loneliness, and she had respected him for keeping her memory alive.

But now, things were beginning to work out; and she had a strong feeling that it was essentially right that they should. Right, not only for herself but for Michael Shayne also.

She moodily drank half the glass of brandy and water, and thought about the wounded man in her bedroom. What manner of man was Jack Bristow? What sort of jam could he have got into in Miami to bring him to her apartment seeking refuge and bleeding from a gunshot wound? In the past, when she had known his sister well, she had sensed that Jack was weak and probably lazy, but she could recall no vicious or unlawful tendencies.

Of course, she told herself drearily, a sister is likely to be the last person to suspect a brother of such things, and it was perfectly possible that Arlene had been unaware of his real character. Also, it had been many years since Lucy had seen Arlene, and all sorts of things might have happened to Jack in the interim. He might well be a noted criminal, wanted by the police of a dozen states, and Lucy would not be aware of it.

But, somehow, she couldn't make herself believe that. Not of the boy whom she had once dreamed about, and who had been able to arouse in her tonight the passionate desire to kiss him by merely sliding the tips of his fingers over the inside of her wrist and laughing up at her with challenging and half-parted lips.

No, Lucy told herself desperately. *He can't be really bad. Certainly I would know subconsciously if he were, and would be repelled rather than attracted by him. Whatever trouble he's in must be the result of a prank or some sort of mistake, and I would be disloyal to Arlene if I refused to protect him for the short time he asked.*

On the other hand, his threat to smear her reputation in front of Michael Shayne if she admitted his presence to the detective rankled, and she conceded in her heart that it was not the act of an innocent lad. Still, it was a threat that had been born of desperation and of his lack of knowledge of Shayne's real character.

There I go, she muttered to herself despairingly, *pretending I know Michael's real character when the fact is that I'm not at all sure how he might react if Jack were to tell him a lot of lies about me. I should be sure that he'd disregard them, but I'm not. I simply don't know. And I'm afraid to put it to the test. On the other hand, I'll hate myself forever if I lie to Michael and let Jack stay hidden in the bedroom without telling him.*

Lucy still hadn't made up her mind when the buzzer rang and she got up to push the button that would admit Michael Shayne to the apartment building.

Chapter Two

Mike Shayne: Fall Guy

THE RANGY REDHEAD WAS IN A pleasantly relaxed mood when he appeared at the top of the stairs in front of Lucy's door. He sailed his wide-brimmed Panama over her head into the center of the rug and grinned down at her, putting one big hand at each armpit and lifting her from the floor to kiss her lips lightly.

She was flushed and confused when he set her down, trying to distinguish in her own mind between the sudden rush of passion that had drawn her briefly toward Jack Bristow a short time previously and the very real affection she felt for Shayne.

Misinterpreting her blushing confusion, Shayne slid one arm over her shoulders and turned her back into the apartment. "A person would think that was the first time I ever kissed you, angel. You ought to be used to it by now."

"That's just it, Michael. You've been doing it for years now and I'm beginning to wonder if it means anything to you at all."

She hadn't known she was going to say that. She could have bitten off her tongue after hearing the words if that would have recalled them. Long ago, when she first entered the half-intimate relationship of secretary and favorite female friend of Michael Shayne, she had sworn to herself that she would accept from him only what he freely offered of himself and would never seek anything more. She gazed up at him in stricken silence as he stopped abruptly and his arm tightened about her shoulders.

"I don't believe you really wonder, do you, Lucy?" Michael Shayne's voice was curiously gentle. "I think you know just about how I feel."

She smiled wretchedly and nodded her brown head, eeling away from his encircling arm and avoiding his questioning eyes. "Skip it, Michael." She made her voice light with an effort. "That just slipped out. I guess I've been sitting here alone too long wondering whether you were coming tonight or not. Brooding over a glass of diluted cognac."

She leaned over to pick up her glass in which the ice cubes had melted, drained off the watery residue with convincing gaiety. "Do you want yours straight tonight, Mr. Shayne?"

He nodded. "As usual. Plenty of ice water on the side." He spoke abstractedly, continuing to study her with speculative eyes while his left hand went up mechanically to roll the lobe of his ear between thumb and forefinger.

Lucy knew that look and that gesture by heart. Just as she knew every one of Michael Shayne's looks and gestures. He was troubled and thinking deeply, sorting things out in his mind with that damnable logic of his which sometimes frightened her and often infuriated her.

Lucy sighed and turned to the kitchen. Somehow, the opportunity to tell Shayne about Jack Bristow in the bedroom had vanished. Why had she made that crack about sitting there alone wondering if he were coming? And why had she, tonight of all nights, done something to force the issue between them?

She busied herself in the kitchenette for as long as she dared, pouring

Shayne a full six ounces of amber liquor and fitting four over-sized ice cubes into a tall twelve-ounce glass, then filling it to the brim with cold water. She made her own drink very light this time, and was completely self-possessed when she returned to the living room with a tray.

Her mind was made up. This evening would be like all the other evenings she and Shayne had spent together in her apartment. She would be a reserved and pleasant hostess, making him comfortable and relaxed with good liquor and by being an attentive and responsive listener. After he left—around midnight, it usually was—would be time enough to start thinking about Jack Bristow again.

Shayne was sprawled back at one end of the divan with long legs stretched out in front of him. His red hair was rumpled and his tie slightly askew, the gauntness of his features softened and lessened somewhat by the indirect light from a floor lamp and the comfortable feeling he always had when alone with Lucy.

He watched her without speaking and without moving while she leaned forward to set the tray on a low coffee table close to him and then seated herself on the other side of it. He lifted the cognac glass with knobby fingers and sipped meditatively for a moment, then said:

"Give me a little more time, Lucy. I know I don't deserve it, but I do need it."

She didn't ask him time for what. She knew what he meant. In her heart she wanted to cry out that she couldn't wait much longer, that she was sometimes frightened by the things she felt, that she was a woman of flesh and blood and of normal desires, and that if he didn't want to marry her she wished he would say so and propose some other sort of arrangement.

Instead, she crossed her legs and smoothed the shimmering blue hostess gown over her thighs and replied, "Of course, Michael." Then changed the subject by adding, "Did you see Mr. Selkirk this afternoon?"

There was the tramp of heavy footsteps in the hall outside, and a loud knock on her door before Shayne could reply. He lifted bushy red brows questioningly at her, and Lucy shrugged her shoulders to indicate she expected no visitors and had no idea who was there.

She got to her feet as a second knock followed the first swiftly, went to the door, and opened it a foot to confront a red-faced and uniformed city policeman.

There were others beyond him, she noted, arousing the occupants of the other apartments, and knew instantly why they were there. Panic flowed through her and caused a tight knot in her throat, but she managed to get her words out past the knot calmly:

"Yes? What is it, Officer?"

"Sorry to bother you, Ma'm. Is anyone in your apartment with you?"

She clung tightly to the doorframe and the door tightly with both hands while demanding, "Why do you want to know?"

"We're looking for a man," the cop explained impatiently. "Traced him into this apartment house in the last hour and we've got to ask your permission to search your place for him."

"Do you suspect me of harboring a fugitive?" she asked hotly.

"No need to get nasty about it. Maybe you are, at that." The blue-coated policeman pushed forward against her with a leer. "If I was on the lam I wouldn't want a nicer place to lay up."

She didn't hear Shayne behind her. Wasn't aware that the redhead had moved from the divan until she felt his hand on her shoulder thrusting her aside roughly.

The policeman jerked to an astonished halt when he was suddenly confronted by the blazing eyes and jutted jaw of Shayne instead of a shrinking female, and heard a harsh voice demanding:

"What the hell do you mean by pushing into a private place and insulting a decent woman?"

"Can it, friend." Taken aback and on the defensive, the policeman adopted a blustering tone and made the mistake of reaching for his stick. "Keep your yap shut before I run you in for . . ."

Balanced lightly on the balls of his feet, Shayne hit him full in the mouth. Lucy moaned faintly and covered her face with her hands as she saw Shayne's fist drive forward and upward.

The officious cop staggered back and caught his heel on the threshold and went over backward in the hall with flailing arms. Shayne stalked grimly into the doorway and confronted a sergeant who came running from another room at the sound of the affray. The sergeant stopped with mouth agape when he saw and recognized Shayne.

He said sharply, "What the hell is this? Get up from the floor and start talking, Morrison."

Morrison got to his feet slowly, spitting out a lower tooth with a curse, his beefy face as scarlet with rage as the blood trickling from his mouth.

"That must be him, Sarge." His hand went to his holster. "Jumped me from behind the door and slugged me with brass knucks or something."

The sergeant snorted contemptuously and lunged forward to grab the half-drawn gun while Shayne lounged against the doorframe.

"Get back, you fool," ordered the sergeant. "That's Mike Shayne. If he had used knucks you wouldn't have any teeth left. Get down the hall with Langley and I'll handle this."

Mention of Shayne's name changed the patrolman's surly attitude to one of abashed deference, for it was commonly known in Miami that the private detective and Chief of Police Gentry were close friends. After he had slunk away, the sergeant asked Shayne:

"What did the big-mouthed ape do to ask for what he got?"

"Barged into my secretary's apartment without any explanation and insulted her," Shayne told him coldly. "What's this all about?"

"We're hunting a killer we hoped we had cornered in the building. Slightly-built young fellow. I didn't know that was Miss Hamilton's apartment," the sergeant went on defensively. "You know how it is when you're trying to work fast. Don't mind if I take a look around, do you?"

"I mind plenty," Shayne told him coldly. "Miss Hamilton tried to tell your man there was no one here. Now, I'm telling you that she isn't hiding anyone in her bedroom. That good enough or do I have to call Will Gentry?"

"That's plenty good enough for me," the sergeant assured him hastily. He turned back to the others who were

emerging from the other apartments empty-handed, and Shayne stepped back to slam the door shut violently.

Lucy was huddled back on the divan and she watched Shayne with frightened eyes as he stalked back to pick up his drink. She had never seen him look so savagely angry, and having heard only his end of the colloquy at the door, she asked timidly:

"Who are they looking for, Michael?"

"Some punk they were tipped off was hiding here." Shayne's voice grated unnaturally. He shook his head and lowered the cognac a full inch in his glass before setting it down. "My damned temper," he muttered disgustedly. "Going to get me in trouble some time."

He grinned down at Lucy with an effort and touched the tendrils of brown hair at the nape of her neck with his fingertips. "I guess maybe I do like you a lot, angel. Something went all over me when that so-and-so said what he did. I'm sorry."

"I'm not," Lucy told him sturdily. "I'm glad. But," she added faintly, "I have to tell you something, Michael."

He dropped back onto the divan and got out a pack of cigarettes, his thoughts still on the incident at the door. "That's the whole trouble with cops," he muttered. "They take an ignorant cracker out of the backwoods and give him a gun and authority to bulldoze his betters. He's been kicked in the teeth all his life, and he immediately begins to take out all his accumulated venom on the general public. I've told Will Gentry a hundred times . . ."

Lucy wasn't listening to him. She was biting her lip indecisively and looking at the closed bedroom door. "Michael!" she broke in. "I said I have something important to tell you."

"Okay. Tell it." He waited quizzically.

"It's—I don't know how to say it." Lucy's face was suffused with shame. Shayne's words to the sergeant continued to echo in her ears: "*. . . I'm telling you that she isn't hiding anyone in her bedroom.*"

"It—it all happened so fast," Lucy said faintly. "I hadn't time to think. I didn't really mean to tell a lie, Michael."

"What are you talking about?" His grin changed to a frown of perplexity.

"I'm trying to tell you the best I can. To explain why I didn't . . . when that policeman came . . . just at first. Then things happened so fast I didn't have a chance. You knocking him down and all."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"The man. He *is* in my bedroom, Michael."

It took the space of twenty seconds for her words to fully penetrate into Shayne's consciousness. His perplexity changed slowly to incredulity, to understanding, and to cold rage.

"Do you mean that, Lucy? You let me lie to the sergeant? Use my reputation and friendship with Gentry to refuse them entry while you were hiding their man all the time?"

Lucy nodded without looking up. Tears were streaming from her eyes She winced as though from a blow with each word Shayne spoke. There was a brief silence and still she did not dare look up. Then came the sound of Shayne's heels striking hard on the floor as he strode to the outer door and jerked it open. She sat with bowed head and listened drearily to the sound of him taking the stairs to the bottom

three at a time.

Lucy didn't lift her head until he returned. There were deep trenches in his gaunt cheeks, and his eyes were cold. He jerked his head in negation and said, "Too late. Sergeant Loftus and his crew have already gone." He strode past her to the bedroom door and turned the knob.

The door did not budge.

Shayne turned angrily and demanded, "Did you lock him in?"

"No," faltered Lucy. "There's a bolt on the inside. He must have closed it."

Shayne turned and thundered his fist against the door. When this brought no response, he shouted hoarsely, "Unlock the door before I break it down."

He paused and there was complete silence in the apartment. Shayne waited for no more than ten seconds, then took one step back, crouched a trifle, and drove his shoulder against the edge of the door.

Flimsy wood splintered under the impact and the door flew open. Lucy sat motionless on the divan, the back of her hand pressed tightly against her mouth when Shayne stalked implacably inside the dark bedroom. She realized, now, that she didn't know whether Jack was armed or not.

She heard Shayne's heavy footfalls inside the bedroom, then an exclamation and a leap forward. She sat scarcely breathing, waiting for the sound of a struggle, some word from Shayne or Jack.

There was nothing for the space of at least half a minute, then the sound of Shayne's measured tread returning across the bedroom. His features were set in an expressionless mask and his voice was toneless when he re-entered the room.

"So, you really pulled a fast one, Lucy. He's gone. The window screen opening onto the fire escape is ripped open and I heard running footsteps in the alley below, but it was too dark to see anything. So we've sent a murderer out on the streets of Miami to kill again if he wants to, just because I was fool enough to trust you."

He strode past her to the telephone, lifted it, and dialed the number of Miami police headquarters.

Chapter Three

Desperate Woman

LUCY HAMILTON SAT FROZEN TO the divan for a long moment while Shayne waited to be connected with the police.

He mustn't, she thought suddenly. *I mustn't let him do that. Not for my sake, but for his.*

She was on her feet with the thought, across the room and clawing at the hard-muscled arm holding the receiver while she cried out:

"No, Michael. Not the police. You've got to listen to me. Don't you see what it means?"

He remained unmoved and immobile, her voice and her clawing fingers having as little effect as the buzzing of a mosquito.

"Hello," he barked into the phone. "Mike Shayne talking. Who's handling . . .?"

That was as far as he got. With strength and courage born of her desperate need, Lucy dropped to her haunches and seized the telephone cord with both hands, yanked back with all her weight, and jerked it loose from

the box. She went sprawling on her back as the cord came free, and lay there looking up into Michael Shayne's face with an expression of horror at her own temerity, mingled with grim determination.

"You have to listen to me, Michael," she gasped, her pointed breasts rising and falling rapidly behind the tight bodice, the shimmery blue fullness of her skirt billowed up to expose bare knees and a brief expanse of thigh. "I won't let you call the police. I won't let you do it."

Shayne looked down at her for a moment with an expression of icy detachment. He slowly replaced the disconnected receiver on its prongs and said wonderingly, "You're being stupid, Lucy. A little delay won't help him much."

"You're the one who's being stupid, Michael Shayne." Tears of rage and mortification ran down Lucy's cheeks. She struggled up to a sitting position and tugged her skirt down to her ankles. "Just because you're angry at me, you're acting like a college boy. You just said a little delay won't help much."

Her voice rose sharply, "Don't you realize what the *Tribune* would do with a story like that? 'Mike Shayne's secretary confesses hiding murderer with help of the detective who used his friendship with the Chief of Police to refuse admittance to local officers.' Good heavens, Michael, they'd get your license, drive you out of business in Miami!"

"Is my license more important than letting a killer escape?" His voice was remote and cold. He looked down at her with loathing which he made no effort to conceal.

"It's not only you, Michael," she wailed. "They'll nail Chief Gentry to the Cross also, because you used his name to send those men away."

She reached one hand up to him imploringly. "Stop a moment and think about it," she pleaded. "Jack Bristow is shot in the stomach and certainly can't get far from here. They had traced him here and must be searching near by for him. What help would your information be now? It would just verify what they already know."

Shayne disregarded her outstretched hand. He turned on his heel without a word and went back to pick up his drink. Wearily, Lucy dragged herself to her feet and stood watching him, wondering what to say next, how to make him understand that she hadn't really meant to harbor a fugitive, that she had believed Jack when he protested his innocence, that, if she'd had the slightest idea he was involved in anything as serious as murder, she certainly wouldn't have . . .

Murder! For the first time in the hectic series of events, the word actually impinged on her consciousness.

"He isn't, of course," she cried out happily. "There's some mistake. Not Jack. A purse-snatching or burglary, maybe. But not—murder."

"This Jack," he said slowly. "Bristow, was it? How long was he with you, Lucy?"

"Not long. Not more than half an hour before you came."

"What did he tell you to get you to take him in?"

"That he was in trouble and needed time to stay free of the police to avoid being framed for something he hadn't

done. I wasn't sure about his innocence at first when I thought it was something minor," she hurried on ingenuously, "but I know he'd never kill anybody."

"What makes you so positive?"

"He just isn't the type."

Shayne shook his head in sudden irritation while three deep creases formed between his eyes. He moved toward the kitchen and Lucy was forced to step aside out of his path.

He muttered, "I think I'd like to hear a lot more about this Jack Bristow—but I feel I'll need another drink in order to take it."

Lucy gazed after him despairingly, then took two tottering steps to let her trembling body sink onto the divan. She knew she was making a mess of everything. That she was saying exactly the wrong things to gain Shayne's sympathy and understanding. Yet what, she wondered miserably, could she tell him to make him understand? The truth, of course. Yet the truth was so fantastic and unbelievable!

How could she make him understand why she hadn't told him about Jack the moment he arrived? By repeating his threat to lie to Shayne about her if she did? That would arouse only disbelief and contempt in her employer. Lucy was still casting about wildly for a lie that would be more believable than the truth when Shayne stalked back with another straight drink of cognac.

He looked at his watch as he settled himself, saying quietly, "First, I want a complete physical description of Bristow, how badly he was wounded, and any ideas you may have about where he might have gone."

"Wait a minute," he said sharply, when Lucy started to protest. "I admit you've got me in a hell of a spot, and that I pulled Will Gentry into it with me when I chased the sergeant and his men away. If I decide it will really accomplish anything to tell the exact truth about your pulling the wool over my eyes, I'll do so. But if an anonymous phone call will bring the same results, I'll try to keep you out of it. And myself and Gentry, incidentally. So don't waste time with any explanations. Give me his description and what you know about him."

Holding herself in check and keeping her voice as flatly unemotional as she could, Lucy complied. She heard a disbelieving grunt from Shayne when she explained that she hadn't seen Jack for years—and then only once briefly in New Orleans, and had no idea where he might go to in Miami. She did explain that he claimed to have been shot by a dead man and had come to her for help because he knew no one else, and knew her address from his sister.

Shayne nodded curtly when she finished. He got up with a glance at her ruined phone and said, "I'll go downstairs to call that information in. Don't go in the bedroom. If they don't pick him up fast, I'll try to lift his prints from in there for the police to work on."

Lucy sat huddled miserably on the divan while he was gone. His set face told her nothing when he returned, but he sat down and took a sip of cognac and spoke to her matter-of-factly.

"It's pretty bad. There's a city-wide alarm out for him, and your description may help. A girl," he went on moodily, "was strangled in a rooming house on

Eighteenth Street. A taxi driver picked the fool up a block from the girl, and brought him directly to this address. He remembered him and how oddly he acted, and when he heard about the girl later over the radio, he told the police. There was nothing about any shooting," he added, "no gun found on the girl nor any blood around."

"I know there's some mistake, Michael. I just know he wouldn't strangle a girl."

"Nuts! No one ever knows." Shayne shook his red head angrily. "It isn't that easy, Lucy. And now, just between the two of us, why in the name of God did you hold out on me? I can maybe understand your not calling a doctor after the story he told you. But why not me? I'd have listened to him. If he was in trouble and innocent, I might even have helped him."

"I know, Michael." Lucy's head was hanging down and she was staring with absorption at the tips of her mules. "It all happened so suddenly. I don't know how to explain it. I warned him I'd tell you as soon as you came, and now I suppose that's why he went out the window and down the fire escape. Because he was afraid I would."

She drew in a long breath and lifted round, luminous eyes to Shayne's intent gaze. "I guess it doesn't matter now," she said simply, "but he threatened to tell you we were lovers if I brought you into it."

"Do you think for a minute," Shayne asked shortly, "that I care if you've had fifty lovers?"

"I guess not." She looked away from him again. "I guess I was a fool to think you'd care one single goddamn."

"Or would have believed a word of it," stormed Shayne, getting up to stride back and forth in front of her, rumpling his hair violently with both hands.

"My God, Lucy! What sort of heel do you take me for? If you can't trust me any further than that . . ."

"What?" she asked faintly.

"Then it's time you started looking for another job."

"I will," she agreed. "Tomorrow morning."

He stopped abruptly in his pacing to glare at her. "Not without giving me two weeks' notice, you won't. You listen to me, Lucy—"

Her buzzer sounded from downstairs. Shayne flung himself away from her to bark a "Who is it?" into the speaking tube beside the door.

He said, "Sure. Come up," and pressed the button. His manner and voice were curiously altered when he opened the door wide and turned back into the room with a shrug. "Chief Gentry and Tim Rourke," he told her. "Let me do all the talking until we find out what it's all about."

Chapter Four

Quick-Think Boy

WILL GENTRY, CHIEF OF THE Miami police force, was a big, stolid man with a beefy face and curiously rumpled eyelids which habitually drooped low over wearied and cynical eyes. He was wheezing loudly as he pulled himself up the last step to Lucy's landing, and he nodded briefly without speaking to Shayne, who lounged in the doorway waiting for him.

Shayne shrugged and moved aside to let Gentry enter the apartment. He

raised bushy red eyebrows questioningly at Timothy Rourke, his second oldest friend in Miami and long-time reporter on the *Daily News*. Rourke was as lean and hard-muscled as a greyhound, and carried himself with the same springy, effortless ease. He shook his head and put one finger to his lips in response to Shayne's unspoken question, indicating that he had tagged along on sufferance and on his promise not to talk out of turn.

Shayne nodded his red head a quarter of an inch and wheeled to precede Rourke into the living room.

Chief Will Gentry was standing flat-footed in the center of the rug with an unlit black cigar in his blunt fingers. Moving in from the door, Shayne saw him put the cigar carefully in his mouth and then fumble inside his right vest pocket. Instead of producing a match, he drew out a small slip of paper, folded once, and held it out to Lucy.

"Is that your handwriting?"

Lucy took the paper timidly, glancing up imploringly at Shayne but getting no response from him. Her fingers shook as she unfolded the paper and saw her name and street address written on it in ink. She shook her head and frowned in perplexity.

"No. I didn't write it."

"Looks like a woman's handwriting," persisted Chief Gentry.

She nodded hesitant agreement. "But it's not at all like mine."

"Do you have any idea who might have written it, Lucy?" persisted the Chief.

"If you mean do I recognize the writing—no. Any one of lots of people might have written down my name and address, I suppose."

Will Gentry shrugged burly shoulders and looked around for a comfortable chair. He lowered himself into one carefully and began to search his pockets for a match. Timothy Rourke moved past Shayne toward a seat on the divan beside Lucy, tilting a hand toward his mouth expressively and lifting black eyebrows.

Shayne nodded and started toward the kitchenette, asking Gentry, "Want a drink while you're being mysterious, Will?"

"Beer," sighed Gentry, "if Lucy has any on ice." He had found a kitchen match, and now struck it on the sole of his shoe and put the flame to the end of his cigar. He was placidly emitting clouds of noxious black smoke when Shayne returned with an uncapped bottle for him, bourbon and water for Rourke.

The reporter was sitting upright beside Lucy, his gaze fixed on the trailing end of the loose telephone cord behind the chief's back. His black eyes glittered with interest and with some amusement up at the redhead when Shayne handed him the drink.

"Been trying to date some gal right here in front of Lucy?"

Shayne glared at him for silence and disregarded the question. He sat at his end of the divan and asked, "Ready to tell us what it's all about, Will?"

Gentry approvingly drank half his bottle of beer. "That slip of paper with Lucy's name and address on it was found on the floor beside a Miami telephone book open at the H's. As though someone had looked up her number."

"I had her change to an unlisted phone six months ago," exclaimed Shayne. "Too many cranks know she

works for me. So you found this on the floor. Where?"

"In a rooming house on Eighteenth Street." Chief Gentry flicked ashes on his paunch and drank more beer from the bottle.

"That's very interesting," said Shayne in exasperation. "Certainly explains everything. Look, Mr. Bones, what was particular about the paper that you came into it and brought it here?"

"The most interesting thing of all," said Gentry placidly, "was that the body of a dead girl lay on the floor, too. She'd been strangled."

Sound was wrenched from Lucy's throat. She started forward, her face working convulsively, but Shayne put in sharply:

"Some friend of Lucy's? Is that it?"

"I don't think so." Gentry's veiled eyes hadn't missed Lucy's involuntary start, but he disregarded it and answered Shayne matter-of-factly. "We don't know too much about the dead girl yet, but off-hand I wouldn't pick Trixie for anyone Lucy'd give her address to. Handwriting doesn't jibe, either, with samples we found in her room. What I am guessing is that the man who killed her had the address in his pocket and dropped it accidentally."

"That sounds like a reasonable deduction," said Shayne scornfully. "You don't suspect Lucy of being intimate with a murder victim, but with the murderer. Any particular reason for thinking that?"

"Why, yes," said Gentry comfortably. "It does seem reasonable when we know from a taxi driver that a young fellow flagged him half a block from the Eighteenth Street address soon after we figure the girl was killed, and had him drive to this building. He acted nervous and funny in the cab," Gentry went on slowly, "and after he got out the driver noticed a blood smear where he'd been sitting."

"I get it." Shayne sat back and nodded. "The man Sergeant Loftus was looking for. Did he find him?"

"Not here. The trail was maybe an hour cold. He searched every apartment in the building," Gentry went on heavily, "except this one. Claims you objected and so he laid off."

"Did he tell you why I objected?" Shayne demanded hotly. "When your goddamned storm troopers learn some manners they'll get along better in police work."

"Loftus told me about it," grunted Gentry. "Don't blame you much, Mike, but things would look a hell of a lot better if you hadn't interfered. Too bad Loftus didn't know about this name and address when he was here."

"If he had," said Shayne, "I'd have invited him in to look for himself. As it was . . ." He spread out his big hands with the palms upward.

"Sure. But it's going to look bad if the papers get hold of it."

Shayne grinned and glanced aside at Rourke. "So you brought a reporter along with you?"

"To give me the chance to cover up for you—as usual," said Rourke. He yawned, unwound his lean body from the couch, and strolled casually toward the open bedroom door that sagged inward on loose hinges behind Gentry.

Lucy started involuntarily and put her knuckles to her mouth, but Shayne's eyes followed the reporter with only casual interest and he called

out, "Men's room is on the right."

Light footsteps came running up the stairs at that instant, and a trim young officer paused in the open outer doorway panting excitedly:

"Thought you'd want to hear this, Chief. Just got a flash over the radio from headquarters. An anonymous telephone call identifies the Eighteenth Street killer as Jack Bristow from New Orleans. With a description and a report that he is shot in the stomach, confirming the taxi driver about his coming here."

"Shot in the stomach, eh?" muttered Gentry. "There wasn't any gun or blood in the room." He was turned in his chair to listen to the man in the doorway, and didn't see Lucy stiffen and turn fear-drenched eyes on Shayne, or note Shayne form the words with his lips:

"Recognize the name, but take it slow."

Gentry said, "Thanks," dismissing his driver with a nod. When he turned back, Lucy was leaning forward nervously, lacing her fingers together while she frowned in apparent deep thought.

"I know that name, Chief Gentry," she began faintly. "New Orleans made me think of it. Arlene Bristow's brother. She worked with me before I met Michael. I met Jack once. Years ago."

Chief Gentry was all attention. "That must explain it. Does she know your present address?"

"Arlene? Oh, yes. We correspond every few months. I suppose she might have given it to Jack if he was coming to Miami."

"But he hasn't been in touch with you recently?"

"She's telling you," said Shayne angrily. "My God, Will! If Lucy has any important dope on a murderer she won't hold out."

"Describe him," ordered Gentry, getting out a pad and pencil.

Hesitantly, Lucy described Jack Bristow, and at Gentry's insistance gave him Arlene Bristow's New Orleans address.

Rourke came lounging in from the bedroom with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and a peculiar glitter in his deepset eyes, just as Gentry finished getting all the information he could from Lucy and got to his feet.

"The man must have come here hoping you'd hide him out and help him on account of his sister," Gentry commented. "You being here must have scared him away, Mike. Too bad you couldn't have been a little later and walked in on him. I'll phone this in to headquarters and have them check with Miss Bristow in New Orleans."

He turned toward the telephone with pad and pencil in his hands, but Timothy Rourke forestalled him swiftly by leaping forward and grabbing up the useless handset, putting one foot on the trailing cord to hide it from Gentry's eyes and beginning to dial feverishly.

"I need this phone, Will. You've got a two-way radio at the curb that'll do your job faster. Have a heart," the reporter urged as the Chief hesitated between anger at his impudence and a willingness to co-operate. "I'll hold off on this other stuff. Just a flash to hit the Bulldog with his name. From an anonymous informant."

He said, "Gimme rewrite," into the dead phone, and Gentry nodded sourly and lumbered to the door. "Anything

to get you out of my hair, Tim. But you'll have to bum your own ride back. Anything else happens, let me know, Lucy."

He went out, and Shayne got up carefully to cross the room and close the door on the night-latch.

Rourke dropped the phone on its prongs and wiped sweat from his face. "That was a close one. Pour me another drink, Mike, and then you children settle down and tell Papa exactly the sort of games you've been playing with telephones and bedroom doors and such."

Chapter Five

Bloody Bundle

MICHAEL SHAYNE GRIMACED sourly and growled, "All right, Bright-eyes. That was fast thinking when you grabbed the phone in front of Will, though not really necessary. We're not hiding anything. Not much, anyhow," he amplified with a glance at Lucy.

She smiled back at him with an effort. "I'm afraid I've got you in an awful mess, Michael. Though I still swear I can't make myself believe Jack Bristow can be guilty of anything like murder."

"An old boy-friend of Lucy's," Shayne explained to Rourke with a shrug. "He never strangled her, and she refuses to believe he'd go that far with any other woman." He gathered up his and Rourke's empty glasses, got an angry shake of her head from Lucy when he glanced at hers, and went into the kitchen for refills.

Timothy Rourke dropped onto the divan beside her and covered one hand with his. "Don't," he said in a low voice, "pay too much attention to Mike. He's sore and jealous, but when it comes to a showdown he'll be riding out in front of you like a knight on a white charger."

Lucy smiled miserably at him. "I've got him in a horrible mess, Tim. You see, Jack did come here to hide from the police. And I didn't tell Michael. I was afraid—"

"Let me do the talking, angel," Shayne cut in sharply from the kitchen doorway. He brought in fresh drinks for Rourke and himself, settled back on the divan, and spoke warningly to the reporter.

"Don't go off half-cocked on any of this. Lucy hadn't seen Bristow for years until he busted in on her a couple of hours ago with a slug hole in his stomach and a crazy story about being shot by a dead man and needing help. She didn't know it was murder, but she did refuse to cover up for him, and tried to call me."

Shayne broke off to gesture at the telephone. "He jerked the cord loose when she tried to phone me, then locked himself in her bedroom. I showed up just then," Shayne went on, improvising swiftly, "and before she could tell me about it, this Sergeant Loftus and his goon squad came charging in and got me sore. So I kicked them out without knowing Bristow had been here, and I admit I felt like a fool when Lucy told me a minute later that he was here.

"I broke down the door," Shayne went on swiftly, "but it was too late anyhow. He'd got out the window and down the fire escape in the meantime. They were already onto him being in this building and I saw no reason to drag Lucy into it by telling her part when it was too late to do any good."

That's all there is to it."

Rourke's black eyes were feverbright. "But you did make that call in to give his name and description?"

"Sure," Shayne conceded readily. "It was too late to do anything else by that time. If the fool hadn't dropped the slip of paper with Lucy's name, she'd never have come into it. And by the time we knew about that, it was too late to start telling Will Gentry the truth."

"I can see all that." Timothy Rourke sank back and took a long pull at his bourbon and water.

Lucy avoided meeting Shayne's eyes because she didn't dare let him see the gratitude shining in hers.

"How badly was Bristow hurt, Lucy?" Rourke asked after a moment.

"I honestly don't know. It was in his side right here." She indicated the spot beneath her ribs with a forefinger. "It wasn't bleeding much outwardly and he seemed pretty good. He claimed a dead man had shot him," she added with a shudder. "I don't know what to think now. Is there any real evidence that he killed the girl on Eighteenth Street?"

Rourke shook his head slowly. "Nothing definite, I guess. They don't know much of anything yet. The girl in an adjoining room found Trixie's body. Gladys Smith, she'd signed the register," he added, "but the other girls call her Trixie. She's new in Miami, and new to the racket, too, I guess. Looks about sixteen and—well, a girl has to be pretty new at it to get herself strangled. About Bristow," he went on, "the only thing tying him to it thus far is the taxi driver who picked him up a block away at the right time and brought him here. That, and the paper with your address on the floor."

Shayne tossed off his cognac and got up to stride up and down the floor. "Will Gentry," he argued, "said there wasn't any blood in the room. No gun. Hardly looks like he was shot by the girl in self-defense."

"He could have carried the gun away with him after she plugged him," parried Rourke. He finished his drink and yawned, then suggested casually:

"Let's quit telling fairy stories and get down to the truth. What *did* happen here tonight?"

Lucy straightened up with a gasp of alarm, but Shayne continued his pacing without breaking stride and declared flatly, "That's all of it, Tim. Don't blame Lucy too much. She thought the guy was still there in the bedroom, of course, when the cops came—and the cop at her door didn't give her a chance to tell him anything. In fact," Shayne went on with a twisted smile, "I sort of took the play away from her when the bastard tried to push in and got insulting."

"Wait a little minute," said Timothy Rourke wearily. "This is me. Remember? Not Will Gentry. Not the cops. I don't mind covering up for you two nice people, but I'm waiting to hear you say which one bumped the guy."

It was Michael Shayne who reacted this time instead of Lucy, who didn't catch the full import of the reporter's words. He stopped abruptly and demanded, "What guy, Tim? What in hell are you talking about?"

"The guy under Lucy's bed," said Rourke. "Jack Bristow, at a guess, from the quick look I grabbed."

Lucy sank back with a little stricken cry, and Shayne slowly turned hotly

questioning eyes on her. "Is Tim kidding, Lucy? Before God. . . ."

"How do I know?" she cried brokenly. "I've told you the truth. I left him lying on the bed. You're the one who looked and said he'd slipped away down the fire escape."

Rourke was sitting erect, looking from one to the other with intense interest when Shayne whirled about and went back into the bedroom on hard heels. Lucy was on her feet at once, her face chalk-white, and Rourke caught her arm as she swayed.

"Take it easy, Lucy. If you're telling the truth . . ."

"But—if it is Jack—" She was trembling violently, and Rourke supported her toward the open door through which they could see Shayne kneeling beside her bed with the blood-smeared towel still protecting the spread.

The redhead rocked back on his heels and looked up at them grimly. "How'd you come to notice him lying here, Tim, when I didn't?"

"That's one of the things," said Rourke, "that I wondered about—you being a great big detective man. Me, I'm just a punk reporter, but when I see the sole of a man's shoe sticking out from under a lady's bed, I get curious and investigate."

Shayne shook his head disgustedly and leaned down to peer under the bed again. He muttered, "I was in a hurry, and when I saw the wire screen onto the fire escape ripped open, I swallowed Lucy's story whole and figured he'd beat it that way."

He lifted himself to his feet slowly and advised Lucy, "You'd better tell us all about it this time, angel. If you shot him in self-defense, it'll be okay."

"But I didn't!" she cried frantically. "I told you he was shot when he came here." She gestured toward the towel on the bed. "See where he lay down? I told you I didn't know how badly he was wounded. He must have crawled under the bed to hide and—and—"

"This guy," said Shayne grimly, "didn't crawl under the bed. He was shoved there, Lucy. And he didn't die of a bullet wound. His throat is slit all the way across."

Lucy's eyes dilated and her knees buckled under her. Rourke held her tightly, shaking his head at Shayne and backing away with the almost unconscious girl.

"For God's sake," he grated, "quit trying to scare Lucy to death and start your mind working. You say the door was bolted on the inside when you broke it down. How in hell could Lucy have done that if she cut his throat?"

Rourke's words brought Shayne to himself abruptly. The look of blank grimness on his face cleared and he strode forward muttering, "Sure. What in hell is eating on me? Sure. She could be telling the truth. That torn screen. Instead of him going out, someone else came in from the fire escape while the door was locked. I must have scared him off when I broke the door, and it was Bristow's killer I heard running in the alley."

Rourke was easing Lucy down onto the divan. Color was coming back into her cheeks and her eyelids fluttered faintly. Rourke stood back from her and spoke to Shayne flatly.

"Get down on your knees to her, you damned ox, and get her in shape to identify the corpse. If it is Jack Bristow, there's going to be hell to pay if

he's found here now."

The lanky reporter turned on his back and hurried into the kitchen where he poured out a slug of cognac and carried it back.

He found Lucy sitting up with Shayne's arm about her shoulders and his face pressed against hers, and there was a look in Lucy's brown eyes that made him clear his throat and turn his head away hastily. When he looked back, Shayne was grinning at him and Lucy was able to say:

"It's all right now, Tim. Give me just a sip of that and I'll—tell you if it's Jack or not."

Shayne released her and stood up as Rourke handed her the cognac. "You're right about one thing, Tim. There's going to be hell to pay if it ever gets out that a corpse was lying under Lucy's bed all the time I was chasing the cops away and while Will Gentry was here questioning us about him."

He went back into the bedroom while Lucy sipped at the cognac, and reappeared in a moment nodding his red head grimly. "He's got a hole in his side just like you said, Lucy. It's pretty clear what happened. Someone knew he was headed here to hide out, and got in through the window from the fire escape to finish him off. Want to take a quick look, Lucy, so there won't be any more mistakes?"

She nodded and got to her feet. "I'm all right now. What's another corpse in your bedroom when you work for Mike Shayne?" She went to him and took his arm tightly, whispering too low for Rourke to hear, "If I am still working for you, Mike. Just before Tim and Gentry came in, you said—"

He patted her hand and turned her toward the bedroom. "I said and did a lot of crazy things, angel. Forget them all while we get to work on this." He stood aside to let Lucy look down at the body of Jack Bristow which he had dragged from its temporary hiding place onto the rug beside her bed.

Death had erased the tormented lines about Jack Bristow's mouth. There was an ugly gash beneath his chin and a lot of blood which Lucy tried to ignore. His black eyes were open, vacant and staring at nothingness.

Lucy drew in her breath sharply and said, "Yes. It's Jack. Why didn't he cry out, Michael, if someone came through the window and attacked him? I didn't hear a sound from in here after I left him."

Shayne shrugged. "He may have passed out and been unconscious on the bed and never knew it happened. That's all we need you for, Lucy. Go back to the living room and finish your drink. Close the door behind her, Tim."

He knelt beside the body and began turning out the pockets of the dead man's slacks. The side pockets yielded a couple of dollars in silver, and the only thing in the two hip pockets was a folded newspaper clipping.

Shayne rocked back on his heels and unfolded it while Tim Rourke peered down at it over his shoulder. There was a picture of two men standing close together and captioned:

OFFICERS WHO DIED IN CAR CRASH.

The story was date-lined New Orleans three days previously, and was an account of a tragedy that had occurred near the Louisiana city when a police car carrying two officers and a prisoner they were taking to the State peniten-

tiary had gone out of control and crashed through the side of a bridge into a river containing thirty feet of water.

The body of the driver of the car had been recovered wedged behind the steering wheel, but his fellow-officer and the prisoner, handcuffed together in the back seat had not been found when the news story was written.

Both men glanced through it hastily, and Rourke said, "I remember that story. They still haven't found the two bodies. Guy was a bank messenger who pulled a fake holdup and got away with about eighty grand, which they never recovered either."

Shayne refolded the clipping and thrust it into his pocket. "We've got to get him out of here. Not a cop in the world will believe us now if we call them in and tell the exact truth. Not even Will Gentry, even though he'd try like hell to believe us."

Timothy Rourke grinned and asked, "Isn't there a little old law about not moving a corpse?"

"I think maybe there is," Shayne agreed mockingly, "and you and I are getting ready to break it." He went to the window with the ripped screen and pulled the wire aside to lean out and look down. He withdrew his head and nodded.

"Easy enough. The alley is dark. You go on down," he told Tim matter-of-factly, "and case it just to be certain. I'll roll him in this rug and turn out the lights. If it's okay, whistle and I'll carry him down."

"Going to leave him down there?" Rourke had both hands in his pockets and was studying the dead man with interest. "Not a bad-looking kid," he muttered. "Damned if I'm not just about ready to take Lucy's word for it that he isn't a girl strangler."

"We'll find out about that later. Right now I want him out of here." Shayne scowled and wiped sweat from his face. "I think we'll leave him in the alley. This is messed up enough without throwing the cops off any more by ditching him someplace else."

"Loftus will have searched the alley when he was here before."

"I know. And there won't be enough blood where we put him down." Shayne paused in indecision. "Maybe we'd better use my car. Carry him a few blocks and drop him."

"You're beginning to think like Mike Shayne again. Get hold of yourself, Mike, and quit blaming Lucy for what she couldn't help. This is dynamite and you'd better realize it. Gentry has taken a lot from you, but he'll never swallow it if anything in God's world points back to Lucy's apartment on this."

Shayne muttered, "I know." He pulled car keys from his pocket and passed them to Rourke. "It's parked right in front. Pull up and drive through the alley once with your lights on. Come back with them out and stop underneath if it's okay."

Rourke took the keys and went out, and Shayne went to work swiftly. He first checked the body to make certain nothing of importance remained in any of the pockets. He found nothing at all. He then rolled the remains of Jack Bristow in the scatter rug and carried it to the window, examined the frame of the ripped screen, and found it came off easily. He removed it and carried it to a similar window on the other side of the room that let onto a sheer drop instead of the fire escape, removed that

frame, and replaced it with the cut screen.

His car passed slowly beneath him in the alley with headlights on as he worked, and returned without lights when he had the intact screen ready to replace the ripped one at the fire escape.

He went into the living room swiftly to grab his hat and tell Lucy, "Sit tight until you hear from me. I'm taking the rug and most of the blood and changing the screen. Get rid of the towel and anything else, including any possible fingerprints. Then go to bed and try to get some sleep."

Lucy arose swiftly as he started back into the bedroom. She caught his arm and choked out, "I'm so terribly sorry, Michael. I don't want you to do anything that—"

He laughed and kissed her forehead and put her aside, saying, "Nuts. You really did me a favor by getting me in so deep I'll have to work my way out. Gives me a reason, if I needed one, to visit some of the girls at that place on Eighteenth Street—so don't expect to hear from me before morning."

He turned away from her and was drawing the bedroom door shut behind him when he heard a knock on her outer door. He hesitated with his hand on the knob, holding it open a crack.

There was a second knock. A little louder and more demanding. He saw Lucy move slowly across his narrow line of vision toward the door, and he reached behind him to thumb the switch that plunged the bedroom into darkness.

He heard the other door open, and a man's voice that he didn't recognize: "Miss Lucy Hamilton? I've come to see Jack Bristow."

Michael Shayne waited to hear no more. He closed the door as tightly as he could on its sagging hinges, turned swiftly in the darkness, and grabbed up the bloodied towel from Lucy's bed. He stuffed it in a corner of the rug-wrapped bundle, lifted Bristow's corpse, and carried it to the unscreened window. Thrusting it through onto the fire escape landing, he crawled out after it, reaching behind him for the untorn screen which he had removed from the other window and squatting on the landing to tug the frame into position.

Then he went down swiftly to the dark alley with his burden, to find Rourke waiting beside his unlighted car with the motor purring gently.

He growled a brief explanation of what had happened upstairs while he and the reporter opened the trunk and thrust the body inside.

"You'll have to get rid of it," Shayne ended sharply. "I'm going around front and upstairs to see who just barged in on Lucy looking for Bristow.

"Ditch him any damned place," he went on swiftly in answer to Rourke's unspoken question, "and get rid of the rug and towel in the Bay or some place. Then drive to my place and wait for me if I'm not there."

He hurried away toward the lighted street in front of the apartment building before Rourke had a chance to argue or protest the assignment.

Chapter Six

Repeat Performance

WHEN THE FIRST KNOCK sounded on her door, Lucy cast a frightened glance behind her and saw a narrow gleam of light from the bed-

room and knew that Shayne must have heard and was listening to see what came next.

When the knock was repeated, she moved slowly and warily to give the detective as much time as possible, yet hesitating to delay too long; she thought it would be Will Gentry back with further questions, and she didn't want to arouse his suspicion or antagonism by keeping him waiting.

For the second time that evening she was shocked and disconcerted by the appearance of a strange man at her door. This caller was big. *Hulking* was the first word that came to her mind. He was hatless and bald and middle-aged. He wore a sloppy gray suit that was a little tight across the heavy, stooped shoulders and which hung open and away from the paunch that bulged above belted trousers.

His features were prominent, and somehow the total effect was unpleasant and arrogant though it would have been difficult to say why. He looked, in fact, a little weary and depressed as he stood there, and he lifted one big hand in a vague gesture as though to remove a non-existent hat when he said, "Miss Lucy Hamilton? I've come to see Jack Bristow."

He looked like a cop, was Lucy's first thought. Perhaps it was because she so confidently expected to be confronted by Gentry or one of his men. She didn't think about that. She didn't recognize him as any officer on the Miami force, but she only knew a few of them by sight, of course.

She stepped back hesitantly, protesting, "He isn't here. Chief Will Gentry just left a few minutes ago."

"I know all about him being here," the man said tiredly. "And the other bunch that was here with a sergeant looking for him first." He entered on flat solid feet, looked around the pleasant living room with a sigh, and hooked his thumbs into his waistband in front. "Also about your boss that chased the first gang off."

He cleared his throat. "Matter of fact, I been waiting for Mike Shayne to clear out. Watched him drive off a minute ago and figured I'd mosey up before you had a chance to get Bristow out." He looked at the bedroom door with hooded eyes and started toward it.

Lucy got in front of him swiftly. Her eyes blazed and there was color high in her cheeks. "You've no right to force your way in like this. Let me see your search warrant."

"I didn't force my way in, Miss," he reminded her reasonably. "Knocked on the door and you opened it. Now I'm here it can't do any harm to look around."

He started to circle around Lucy, but she stepped in front of him again, demanding fiercely, "Let me see your credentials."

He put out a big hand to brush her aside. "Nuts to all this, sister. I know Jack Bristow came straight here from that job on Eighteenth Street and that he ain't left here. I know the cops searched every room in this building but your apartment. I know Mike Shayne's reputation from 'way back and I figure you and him are in it together to hide Bristow out.

"You worked it with Will Gentry, but he didn't watch Bristow come in like I did, and don't know he ain't come out like I do. Do I get a look at Jack or don't I?" He pushed her aside and start-

ed forward.

Lucy darted in front of him and stood against the closed bedroom door with arms outstretched to bar his entry. She was panting with anger and fear, straining her ears to hear some sound from inside the room to indicate that Shayne was still busy in there removing the corpse. She could hear nothing, but she was determined to gain as much time for the detective as possible,

"You'll have to attack me to get in," she gasped, "and Michael Shayne will kill you for it. If you know anything about him at all, you know that."

"Aw, now, sister," the man said in perplexity. He stopped directly in front of her and scratched at the fringe of gray hair in front of his left ear. "What's this getting us? I don't know what story Bristow gave you, but your boss won't be causing anybody much trouble in the future when it comes out you and him are hiding a killer. I'll make it easy on you. Just hand over the packet he gave you. That's all I want. Then you and Shayne can do any damned thing you want with him."

"What packet? He didn't give me anything."

"Maybe not," said the man easily. "Then he ditched it here someplace. It's mine, see. Let me find it and I'll not bother you again."

"No," she said desperately. "I'm sure he didn't have anything."

"I know different, sister. And I mean to have it. Out of my way."

He started forward, moved his right hand along his waistline, brushing the loose coat aside to display to her eyes the corrugated butt of a revolver nestled in front of his right hip.

"But I tell you there isn't anything in there."

The man shook his bald head sadly. "Then why you guarding the door like it was the U. S. Mint? I'll just take a look-see, sister." He reached forward and put a heavy hand on her shoulder.

Lucy wriggled backward, forcing the door to the darkened room half open, and his fingers clutched at the neckline of her hostess gown, ripping the fabric slightly.

"No," she cried out in a choked voice. "No!" Her fingers were curved into claws raking at his face, but he brushed her aside contemptuously and lurched forward.

Michael Shayne entered the open front door of Lucy's apartment at that precise instant. He slammed it violently shut behind him as he took in the tableau across the room in the bedroom entrance, and the heads of Lucy and the intruder both jerked around to look at him as though jointly operated by some mechanical device.

Shayne saw Lucy's white face pinched with desperation and the tear in her gown that displayed two inches of white flesh beneath the collarbone. He saw a large, bald-headed, unpleasant-appearing stranger who was apparently trying to thrust her backward into her bedroom.

All three of them stood very still and looked at each other. Lucy tried to speak, but her voice rasped in her throat and no other sound came out.

The big man's cold gaze raked Shayne up and down with hostility. He asked out of the side of his mouth, "Who's this barging in, sister?"

"The name is Shayne," the redhead told him flatly. He began to move forward, hands hanging easily by his sides,

"Then why you guarding the door like it was the U. S. Mint? I'll just take a look-see, sister."

gaunt face expressionless except for a dangerous blaze in the gray eyes.

"So you're the tough private dick?" The big man's voice held a note of half-derision, mixed with seeming anticipation.

"Tough enough." Shayne's voice was relaxed. "Suppose you come out of my secretary's bedroom and tell me what this is all about."

"Let's both go *in*, huh? From what I've seen, she's got plenty for two."

Lucy shrank back, closing her eyes against Shayne's slow, implacable stalking advance. She didn't understand it. The man was drawing Shayne on—begging for trouble instead of avoiding it.

Shayne didn't reply. He continued to move forward. There was death in the room and both men were unconscious of Lucy. The intruder's bulk blocked the doorway in front of her and she couldn't see Shayne now. She tried to dart past him, crying out:

"No, Michael! Don't. He's got a gun."

His heavy left arm flailed back, striking her cruelly across the mouth and knocking her to her knees. Through a wave of blackness, she heard Michael Shayne's voice, flat and deadly:

"You're going to pay for that—a high price, mister."

He was closer now. She knew he was still coming. That nothing would stop him. She had known him for years and heard his voice like that only once before in all that time. Without looking at his face, she could see it as it had been that other time.

She got to her feet and groped behind her in the semi-darkness. The man had not moved from the doorway.

She fumbled for the back of a straight chair and found it. Her fingers gripped it with desperate urgency when she heard the man's voice.

"This is gonna be real nice. One more step, shamus. . . ."

From behind she saw movement of his right elbow. The chair swung high in an arc over her head and crashed with shattering force atop the bald dome that glistened so invitingly.

He went to his knees and his gun came out and at the same moment Shayne's body struck him in a long driving tackle from in front. They crashed together backward into Lucy and the three of them were tangled on the floor of the darkened bedroom in a writhing, struggling pile.

Lucy rolled to one side while the two men pummeled each other, and her hand encountered the butt of the stranger's gun, which had been knocked from his hand by Shayne's lunge.

Just as she got to her knees with it, one of the struggling figures broke away from the other and scrambled across the room to the unbroken screen which Shayne had put in the window on the fire escape.

He went through it headfirst, and Lucy knew it was the stranger who was escaping while Shayne slowly dragged himself up from the floor behind.

She ran to the window with the heavy gun in her hand, peered out and downward and could hear the clatter of feet on the iron stairs far below, but it was too dark to see anything.

She turned back and Shayne was getting to his feet groggily, blood streaming from his nose and a cut lower lip.

She ran to him with a little cry of dismay, but he pushed her off, muttering thickly, "Got to phone in—report this." He lurched out into the living

room, glared angrily at her unusable phone, then hurried out to knock on the first door that showed a light behind it.

He returned in a few minutes, holding a handkerchief to his nose and mouth. "The police have got it," he reported. "Damn it, Lucy, who was the man and what did he want?"

Chapter Seven

"X" Equals—?

"I DON'T KNOW WHO HE WAS," she cried out. "I thought he was a policeman at first—that I'd seen him around someplace. But I guess he wasn't, from the way he acted."

"Had that same feeling myself," Shayne muttered, disappearing into the bathroom and returning in a moment with a wet washcloth to staunch the blood. "Tell me exactly what he said and did."

"First he said he'd come to see Jack Bristow—that he knew Jack was here. Then he changed and said all he wanted was some packet he thought Jack had given me. When I swore Jack hadn't, he said it must be hidden someplace and he'd look for it."

Shayne sat down wearily on the divan. His nose and cut lip had stopped bleeding and he looked ruefully at the bloody cloth. "The bastard butted me with his thick head. Did you see how he went straight for the window in the dark, Lucy? He must have *known* there was a fire escape landing outside, the way he dived through."

For a moment she didn't understand. Then she said unhappily, "You mean that you think—*he* was the one who came in earlier and killed Jack?"

"Yeh. I think running up and down your fire escape is getting to be a habit with him. How's for getting us a drink, Lucy? The police will be here in a few minutes to get a report from us. Don't mention Bristow to them. Just say this gorilla forced his way in and tried to rape you, and that I walked in in time to save you from a fate worse than death."

Shayne settled back against the cushion as Lucy hurried out to the kitchen, closed his eyes thoughtfully for a moment, and tugged at his ear lobe with a look of intense concentration on his lined face. When she returned with a tray holding a cognac bottle and glasses, he had taken from his pocket the newspaper clipping found on Bristow's body and was studying it with narrowed eyes.

He said thoughtfully, "That feeling of recognition we both had. Remember it, Lucy? Take a look at this picture."

She set down the tray and took the clipping and her eyes instantly widened. "Of course, Michael. That's he. The one on the right. But it says here he was drowned in Louisiana three days ago."

Shayne nodded somberly, reaching for the bottle and pouring himself a straight drink. "That's right. Detective Mark Switzer of New Orleans. And I believe you told me Jack Bristow said a dead man had shot him."

"Yes." She looked at him with dilated eyes. "Where did you get this clipping?"

"From Jack's pocket." Lucy's buzzer sounded from downstairs, and Shayne leaped up to answer through the mouthpiece. He pressed the button to release the downstairs catch.

"Sergeant Hutton coming up," he told her swiftly. "Do just what I said, angel. Give me that clipping and forget it. You never saw the man before. They may suspect it has something to do with Bristow, but they can't prove it."

He went to the door to admit a detective sergeant and two men. To them he gave a brief and concise story of having left Lucy's apartment soon after Gentry's visit and then returning twenty minutes later to find her struggling with an intruder whom he described carefully.

"He had a gun, but she bopped him with a chair from behind and I jumped him in the bedroom doorway there. We tangled on the floor and he broke loose and crashed out the window screen onto the fire escape. That's every damned thing we know about it."

Sergeant Hutton was a slender young man with a cold mouth and probing eyes. He set his men to going over the apartment and fire escape for prints or other clues to prove or disprove Shayne's story, and questioned Lucy as to exactly what had taken place.

While Shayne roamed about morosely, sipping cognac and waiting impatiently for them to finish, Lucy stoutly stuck to the story that the man had forced his way in and made indecent proposals to her and threatened her with his revolver after ripping the telephone wire out. Since the sergeant was evidently not aware of Lucy's connection with the murdered girl on 18th Street or Jack Bristow, he asked no embarrassing questions along those lines, but was forced to accept their story at face value.

When the trio departed, they took the New Orleans detective's gun with them, and also an assortment of prints from the bedroom which Shayne warned them would contain both his and Timothy Rourke's prints.

He breathed a deep sigh of relief when they were gone, squatted in front of the telephone box, and opened it to replace the connection Lucy had broken earlier. He dialed his hotel and asked if Rourke was there waiting for him.

Rourke came on the wire at once, and Shayne told him cheerfully, "Things are looking up a bit at this end. How did your job go?"

He listened with a grin while Tim cursed him for getting him involved in the disposal of dead bodies. Then he broke in, talking swiftly.

"The important thing is you did get rid of him. Okay. Here's another job. Get down to your office and dig up any follow-ups that may have come over the wire on the New Orleans thing we found in Bristow's pocket. . . .

"That's right—" he took the clipping from his pocket and studied it—"Mark Switzer was the cop handcuffed to Hugh Allerdice. The cop who drowned was—Hardinger. See if the bodies of Switzer or Allerdice have turned up. And go back in the files, Tim, to get a full story of Allerdice's bank robbery. Bring those clippings here to Lucy's place? . . . Right."

He hung up and told Lucy, "Now we're going to tear this place apart to see if Bristow did ditch anything here. Think back carefully to the moment he came in the door and tell me what you both did."

"I let him in. He staggered a little and fell to the floor there in the middle of the room. Then I helped him into the bed. That's—all, Michael. He never

came out of the bedroom."

"Then it's in there if anywhere."

"What are we looking for?" she asked anxiously, following him in.

"Damned if I know. You said Switzer mentioned a packet. Did he say anything else to describe it?"

"That's all he said. Except he *knew* Jack had brought something and it belonged to him and he meant to have it."

"All right. So we start looking. The bed first. Then the closets and bureaus. Every possible place and then the impossible places."

It took less than fifteen minutes to search the bedroom thoroughly. They found nothing that hadn't been there before Bristow's arrival, no indication that anything in the room had been moved or tampered with.

During all this time Lucy had carefully refrained from interfering with Shayne by asking any of the million questions that were seething in her mind. But when they returned to the living room and he relaxed with a drink, she spoke up firmly.

"Now tell me what this is all about, Michael. The girl on Eighteenth Street and my address in her room. Jack's getting shot and coming here, and then getting killed in my bedroom. That New Orleans detective who was drowned three days ago, but wasn't drowned after all. *What* is it all about?"

"I'm sure I don't know," he admitted genially. "I've got a sort of theory that seems fairly obvious from the things we know, but there is a lot we don't know yet. Things we're going to have to find out fast before Switzer kills anyone else."

"Do you think he—strangled the girl tonight?"

Shayne shrugged. "Could be. First strangulation, then a bullet in Bristow's belly that didn't quite do the job, and later a knife." He nodded his red head approvingly. "Being a cop, Switzer would realize the advantage of switching murder methods to confuse the issue. Send us looking for three different killers instead of just one.

"I'd certainly like to know how long Bristow has been in Miami," he went on suddenly. "If he just arrived the last couple of days. . . . That sister of his you know in New Orleans? Do you have her telephone number?"

"Arlene? Yes. In my book, I'm sure. But if I call her, Michael, what shall I tell her about—Jack?"

"Nothing," he said sharply. "That is, not the truth. Tell her that he telephoned you this evening and you had a feeling he was in trouble. Try to find out when she saw him last. Most important, try to find out from her if it's remotely possible that her brother could actually be the man called Hugh Allerdice who robbed a bank a couple of months ago and is supposed to have drowned on his way to the penitentiary."

"But how could he be, Michael? How could Jack Bristow be Hugh Allerdice?"

"I don't know. You haven't seen or heard of him for several years," Shayne reminded her. "Men do take on different identities. I admit it's far-fetched," he went on impatiently, "but it's the only thing that adds up to any sort of sense thus far."

"But how can I ask Arlene a thing like that?" wailed Lucy. "I can't just say, 'Oh, by the way, Arlene, has Jack been robbing any banks lately under an alias?' Now, can I?"

He grinned and said, "Don't play

dumb, Lucy. You know how to get at what I want. What's Jack been doing recently? A few leading questions like that without her catching on why you're asking them. Don't expect her to come right out and say he's been robbing banks, but you should be able to tell if she's holding anything back."

"I'll try," said Lucy doubtfully, getting up to take an address book from a drawer of the telephone table.

She found the number, seated herself and gave it to long-distance. Shayne sipped his drink and relaxed, but listened with eager attention when his secretary began talking.

"Arlene? This is Lucy Hamilton speaking. . . . No, I'm calling from Miami. . . . That's right. Maybe it's foolish but I'm worried, Arlene. I had a call from Jack tonight. . . . Yes, Jack. Your brother. He sounded—oh, I don't know, Arlene. Funny and mixed-up. I had the queerest feeling he's in some sort of trouble and I finally decided to call you and ask . . .

"Hello? Is that Arlene? . . . Oh!" Disappointment was manifest in Lucy's voice. "This is Lucy Hamilton calling from Miami, Florida. An old friend of Arlene's. Do you know when . . .?"

She was interrupted suddenly and listened intently to a voice from New Orleans, her face showing shocked dismay as she continued to listen, murmuring little exclamations of "Oh no. How *dreadful.* I'm *so* sorry" and finally breaking in to explain, "It's really about Arlene's brother I called. . . . Yes, I mean Jack. Do you know where he is now?"

Lucy listened again while Shayne lit a cigarette and tried to hold his impatience in check. After another long moment of listening, Lucy said, "Thank you very much," and hung up. She whirled on Shayne, her brown eyes dilated and fearful.

"That was a girl who lives with Arlene. Arlene had an accident yesterday. Hit-run, the police think. She's unconscious in the hospital with a concussion, but expected to recover.

"No one knows how it happened," Lucy went on swiftly. "This girl says Arlene had a telephone call late in the afternoon, and she heard her arranging to meet someone a little later. Then Arlene went out, and the next anybody knew she was found out in the outskirts by the side of a highway. It looks like a hit-run accident, but *could* be that she was thrown from a car."

Shayne's gray eyes were speculatively cold, his cheeks deeply trenched as he absorbed and attempted to evaluate this new information.

"What about Jack?" he demanded.

"He has been in Miami a couple of months, she says. She knows Arlene has gotten one or two letters from him, and that she's been quite upset, though she doesn't know why. It's her impression that Jack was in some sort of trouble and Arlene suspected it."

Shayne got to his feet to pace up and down the room, running big fingers through his mop of red hair. "It all has to mean something," he grated savagely. "There's some sort of equation if we could only figure out what the 'x' stands for. There's got to be a connection! If Tim would only come along . . ."

Lucy's buzzer rang at that instant as though the urgency of Shayne's thoughts had been communicated to it. He grabbed the speaking tube and said, "That you, Tim?"

He pressed the release button and told Lucy, "Get out a bottle of bourbon. Tim's on his way up."

"MY GOD," SAID TIMOTHY ROURKE, halting in the doorway to grin at Shayne's bruised face and cut lip. "You been making passes at Lucy again? I warned you . . ."

"We had a visitor who played rough," said Shayne impatiently. "No time to waste, Tim. What did you get?"

"Not too much." Rourke came in pulling a small wad of clippings from his sagging coat pocket. "No word on the two bodies that disappeared in the river handcuffed together. Supposition is the fast current carried them out to sea and they may never be recovered.

"Ah," said Tim happily, his thin face lighting as Lucy entered with a bottle and glass. "Just what I need. Nothing like toting bodies around town to work up a man's thirst." He seized the bottle and started pouring, and Shayne demanded:

"Were you able to dig up anything on the robbery itself?"

"Why, yes. One interesting small item, at least." Rourke downed three long swallows of straight whisky and smacked his lips. "Got the clipping right here. You want to read it for yourself while I settle down in a corner and get quietly pie-eyed?"

"Give me the important part," said Shayne harshly. "If it's what I think it may be, you can spend the rest of the night getting tight, but I'll have things to do."

"I don't know how it ties in, but it must somehow. This Allerdice was a punk. Very amateurish. Tried to pull one of the oldest stunts in the racket. Carrying an eighty-grand payroll, he disappears between the bank and a construction office . . . turns up two hours later, bruised a bit and sans the cash, with a weird story of having been abducted on the street by two masked men who beat him up and went off with the dough. It took the cops about ten minutes to punch a dozen holes in his story, though they never were able to beat a confession out of him. Things must be different in New Orleans since you left."

"What's the important part?" demanded Shayne impatiently.

"One little item," said Rourke with a grin, "that might have passed unnoticed except for the very sharp pair of eyes belonging to yours truly. A brief mention at the end of the story is made of the fact that when Allerdice's roommate was sought for questioning, it was found that he had checked out early the morning of the robbery and hasn't been seen since. That's all. You take it from there with your world-famous powers of deduction."

"Damn it, Tim!" raged Shayne. "Time is important. The name of Allerdice's room-mate? Jack Bristow?"

Timothy Rourke forced a ludicrous expression of amazement onto his face. "How do you do it, Mister Shayne? With mirrors?"

Shayne was on his feet, hard fingers driving into Rourke's thin shoulder. "It *was* Bristow?"

"Indeed, it was."

Shayne said, "There's our little 'x'! Tim, you stay with Lucy. Finish your drink while she packs an overnight bag. Then take her to a hotel and register her under a different name. She can't stay here alone tonight."

"But, Michael . . ." Lucy began to protest, but broke it off when she saw Shayne's set face. He was already on his way to the door and she knew he wouldn't stop to argue. Not now. Not with the threads in his hands and the design beginning to emerge.

Chapter Eight

Gun-Muzzle Greeting

SITTING BEHIND A SCARRED OAK desk at police headquarters, Chief of Police Will Gentry angrily yanked the sodden butt of a well-chewed cigar from his mouth and threw it toward a spittoon in one corner of his private office. He leaned both elbows on the desk and glared at the redhead who sat across from him.

"You're through covering up, Mike!" he thundered. "You're coming clean with me right now, by God. I've had two killings tonight and an 'attempted rape'—if you expect me to believe the absurd story you and Lucy told Hutton. You're tied up in all three of them."

He paused a moment to control his rage, then ticked off the items on his fingers.

"Lucy's name and address lying beside a murdered girl. The murderer is picked up by a taxi driver half a block from the spot and driven to her door. We get the tip and search every apartment in the place except hers. And why? Why do they make an exception of her? Because you throw your weight around! Because in the past I've been fool enough to befriend you and play along with you, and my men all know it and treat you like a sort of tin god. But, by all that's holy, you're *not* chief of police Mike. Not yet, you're not."

"Wait a minute, Will," Shayne said in an attempt to soothe him. "You know how that happened. When that moronic cop of yours jumped all over Lucy without provocation—"

"You stuck your big yap in and refused to allow him to do his duty," snarled Gentry. "All right. Bristow's body turns up an hour later on a solid citizen's lawn on Fortieth Street. Where it's been dumped out of a car. Slug in his belly and throat slit to a fare-thee-well. And you know what gun that slug fits, Mike?"

"I can guess."

"Can you? Sure it wouldn't be more than a guess on your part?" Chief Gentry thrust his heavy jaw forward belligerently. "To a gun we pick up later in your apartment, Mike."

"I told you about the guy busting in on Lucy. . . ."

"Sure, you told us," snorted Gentry. "Only God knows how many fairy tales you've told us tonight. Where is the guy nobody else saw? We threw a cordon around that neighborhood fast, but he wasn't there. How can you prove there was any guy attacking Lucy? Did you think it was a smart way of accounting for the presence of the murder gun?"

"For Christ's sake, Will," groaned Shayne. "Been a lot easier to ditch it. Who do you think slugged me here?" His hand went up to his bruised and cut mouth.

"How should I guess?" Will Gentry settled back to put fire to another cigar and sighed unhappily. "Are you going to come clean or do I have to lock you up?"

"You'd have to lock me up if I did come clean, Will." Shayne's voice was

hard, his gray eyes very bright as they held Gentry's. "Make your own choice. Do you want your two murders cleaned up fast—plus another murder and an attempted murder in New Orleans?"

"Murder and attempted murder in New Orleans?" ejaculated Gentry. "What do you mean?"

"Bristow was from New Orleans." Shayne paused a moment, frowning to marshal his arguments. "I'm on the inside, Will. Through no fault of my own, I swear before God, but there it is. If I give you what I've got, you'll have no choice but to jail me and the killer will be scared off and probably go free. Trust me for a few hours and I'll hand him to you on a silver platter."

Will Gentry hesitated, chewing savagely on his fresh cigar and fast reducing it to the same soggy pulp as the one he had just thrown away.

"All I need now is a little dope from you," Shayne went on persuasively. "Two things about the strangled girl first. Had her room been searched when the body was found?"

Gentry hesitated, glancing down at a report in front of him. "Thoroughly," he said gruffly.

"Was the girl living alone?"

"Ostensibly." Gentry shrugged. "But there was plenty of evidence she's been shacked up with a man."

Shayne nodded, his eyes very bright. "And in addition to being strangled, Will—were there any other marks of violence on her?"

Gentry glanced down at his report again. "First two fingers of her right hand were broken," he said grudgingly.

Shayne settled back comfortably. "All I need for a fill-in is the taxi driver's story about picking up a wounded man and bringing him to Lucy's address. Exactly what happened?"

Gentry moodily picked up another sheet and read from it. "*Statement by James O'Brien made at nine-fifteen p.m.: A little before nine tonight I was cruising empty and wheeled around the corner of Eighteenth Street and Third. I thinks I hear a shot. Just a loud sort of blup, and I think maybe it's a backfire when I heard it, but now I believe it was a shot.*

"*So I turn into Eighteenth, not thinking much about it, and I see this man trotting toward me in the middle the street waving me down. My headlights hit him good, but the street was dark and I couldn't see much else, but I did think just at first there was a couple other guys on the sidewalk behind him wrestling sorta. Or maybe there was only one. I dunno. I didn't think it was important, see: I pulled up for this fare and he crawls in and gives me the address I drove him to. One thing I remember, he tried to read my name on the license card, and asked me what it was. That's funny because hardly nobody ever does.*

"*I notice he acts sort of sick and stumbles when he gets out, but it's none of my business so I drives on. Later, when I heard over the radio about the girl getting murdered on Eighteenth just a block from where I picked him up and about the same time, I figure the cops oughtta know and I drove into headquarters to make this report. And when we checked my cab, we found a big spot of blood where he was sitting.*"

"That's all of it, Mike. Mean anything to you?"

"Plenty," said Shayne succinctly. "If you'll do me a couple of small favors,

I'll not only promise to give you a killer, but a nice hunk of reward money to toss in your Policemen's Fund."

Will Gentry hesitated, studying Shayne's ruggedly trenched face a long time. He knew how stubborn the redhead could be, and he knew from many similar experiences in the past that Shayne had a way of coming up with answers that the police department couldn't possibly learn simply because Shayne used unorthodox methods that could not be officially countenanced.

He finally said wearily, "How many of my own laws do I have to break?"

"Only a couple of minor ones," said Shayne cheerfully. "I'll do the real dirty work." He looked at his watch. "There's time to get a couple of items in on the eleven-thirty news broadcast if Tim Rourke calls them in fast. First: Have you got a stake-out at the rooming house on Eighteenth?"

"A man at the door to check who goes in and out."

"Pull him off," said Shayne promptly. He reached a long arm for the phone on Gentry's desk and asked for the number of Lucy Hamilton's apartment while Gentry settled back in his swivel chair with a quizzical look on his face while he rolled the sodden cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

Shayne said, "Tim there, Lucy? . . . Good. Put him on." He waited a moment and said:

"Tim, your paper has an eleven-thirty newscast, doesn't it? . . . Fine. Call whoever does the job and give him a couple of late bulletins and tell him they're a must. Got a pencil? . . . Number one: Police are convinced that Jack Bristow, whose dead body was found as a result of alert police work on a lawn on Fortieth Street a short time ago, is the murderer of the girl on Eighteenth Street and have withdrawn the police guard from the premises. Got that?"

He listened a moment and said impatiently, "All *right*. I'm no writer. Rephrase it however you like, but get it all in. Number two: An amusing sidelight on tonight's murder comes from a late interview with James O'Brien of —wait a minute, Tim." He turned and asked Gentry, "You got the home address of the taxi driver?"

"Yeh. Right here." Gentry shuffled papers and read a street address in the southwest section of the city.

Shayne repeated it to Rourke and went on, ". , . taxi driver who tipped off police to the identity of the murderer after the man had ridden in his cab. The cab is privately owned and is used as a family car by the O'Briens when James is not hacking fares, and he lugubriously confessed to this reporter late tonight that he had spent half an hour scrubbing blood off the rear cushion before his wife would allow it inside the family garage. 'In the future,' stated Mr. O'Brien disgustedly, 'I hope wounded murderers will choose another cab for their rides.' Got all that?"

He listened again and said again, "All *right*. Rewrite it in your own inimitable style, but get it on the newscast."

He hung up and found Gentry regarding him with somber thoughtfulness. "What in hell sort of hocus-pocus are you pulling, Mike? You know Miami hackies don't take their cabs home for joy-riding at night."

"Let's hope a guy from New Orleans won't know that." Shayne got up, looking at his watch again. "How soon can

you have your man pulled off the rooming house?"

"Ten minutes," said Gentry grudgingly. "But I still don't see . . ."

"You're not supposed to," said Shayne blithely. "Give me fifteen minutes and—you got a gun handy I can borrow? Save stopping off at my place."

Gentry reluctantly opened a drawer and drew out a Police .38. "I hope to God you know what you're doing."

"I hope so, too," said Shayne fervently, picking up the gun and thrusting it inside his belt. He buttoned his coat over it and went out with a reassuring wave of his big hand.

At a public phone booth outside, he dialed another number and waited until a gruff voice answered. He said, "Mike Shayne, Bob. You doing anything?"

"Only trying to get a little shut-eye. What gives?"

"A little job," said Shayne swiftly. He gave James O'Brien's street address and went on, "Get out there fast, Bob, and go loaded. Pick a spot where you can watch the house and garage without being seen. There may be an attempted robbery, or the occupant may get a phone call and try to leave. Grab anybody who comes around and grab him good because he'll be a killer. If lights come on and O'Brien leaves the house, tail him and for God's sake don't lose him. Cover him close, and go in fast if he meets a man because he'll be a killer, too. Got that?"

"I've got it," said his friend ruefully, "but why don't you chase down your own killers?"

"I hope to. This is just a precaution to keep an innocent man from getting killed if I don't get there in time. Stay on the job until something happens or I drive past. I'll take it slow past the house in a black Hudson, turn at the end of the block, and drive back. You pull out and get your beauty sleep and I'll take over. Okay?"

"Okay, Mike. It sounds like grand fun."

Shayne hung up with a grin and hurried to his car. Robert Moore was a dependable man with a detective agency of his own, and James O'Brien should be in safe hands.

Checking his watch as he drove toward the address on 18th Street, he took it slow so that he entered the block just as a police car pulled up to the curb in front of a three-story converted residence ahead of him. A uniformed figure came down the walk and got in the cruiser as Shayne idled past. He drove on to the next corner and turned right, saw the police car go past behind him as he pulled into the curb.

He walked back along the tree-shaded sidewalk to the house where murder had occurred earlier, turned in as though he belonged there, and tried the front door.

It opened into a dim-lit hallway with a stairway on the left leading to the upper floors. He climbed the stairs quietly, glancing at a notation from his pocket, then scanned the numbers on the doors when he reached the second floor.

Light showed behind number 21, and he could hear laughter inside the room. A radio blared down loudly from the third floor, masking his footfalls. The other doors along the hallway were dark.

He stopped in front of number 24 and tried the knob. It was locked, of course,

but it was an ordinary, old-fashioned lock.

A skeleton key opened it easily and he stepped inside the dark, smelly room and closed the door without locking it. He ran a pencil flashlight around the murder room to orient himself, saw a double bed in one corner, an overstuffed chair in another, and two straight chairs against the wall near the door. There was nothing, now, to indicate that a girl had died here a few hours earlier, or that the room had been thoroughly searched as Gentry had stated.

He lifted a straight chair to a position close to the unlocked door, noted the time was 11:40, snapped off the flash, and sat down to wait in the darkness.

He wouldn't wait very long, he told himself. This was only a wild hunch with the mathematical chances about a thousand-to-one against its succeeding. But there was that one chance. There had been a police guard outside ever since the murder was discovered. If anyone had been waiting for a chance to enter, or had heard the newscast, he would now think it safe to do so.

But he wouldn't hang around long, Shayne told himself. Until 12:30, he decided. If no one had showed by then, he'd get out to O'Brien's, which was a much better bet. Bob Moore was a good man, but the redhead preferred to be in on his own kills if possible.

Waiting in the dark for something he really didn't expect to happen was a slow and deadly boring business. Within five minutes, Shayne was yawning widely, and at the end of ten his eyes persisted in drifting shut. Then he heard someone climbing the stairs, and he stiffened to alert attention for a moment, but they went on up to the floor above.

He didn't hear the man approaching when he did come a few minutes after midnight. He heard nothing outside until there was a faint rattle of the doorknob within inches of where he sat. He did not move a muscle except to draw the gun Chief Gentry had loaned him.

The door opened a tiny, cautious crack, then came open swiftly as the figure of a man stepped inside.

Michael Shayne was on his feet, ramming the muzzle of Gentry's gun into the other's ribs before he could close the door. There was a startled grunt of astonishment from the intruder, and Shayne found the wall switch that turned on an overhead light.

Cowering away from him in a half-crouch, white-faced and desperate with fear, an improvised and bloody bandage wrapped about his head, was a man Shayne had never seen before.

Shayne heeled the door shut and said grimly, "Thanks for dropping in, Allerdice. Sit down and we'll have a talk."

Chapter Nine

Small Fry

"HOW . . . WHO ARE YOU? OH, God in heaven," moaned Hugh Allerdice, sinking to his haunches and covering the dirty two-day beard on his face with both hands.

Shayne moved swiftly to grab him by the shoulder and drag him to the bed. "None of that matters now," he snarled. "Sit up and start talking. Where's your pal Mark Switzer?"

"I don't know." The youth was sobbing now. He was a beaten man. Shivering, he went on, his voice low. "I haven't

seen him for hours. Since he shot Jack and hit me over the head and left me for dead, I guess." Dazedly, he put his hand to his bandaged forehead. "I managed to stagger behind a hedge and then passed out. I just came to a while ago and fixed the bandage and came back and saw a cop at the door. What's happened?"

"First, I want to know fast about you and Switzer. Not the New Orleans part. I've got that figured. Tonight. When you came after Bristow and the money."

"Mark insisted on coming up," said Allerdice dully. "We saw Jack going out like for a walk, and Mark said that was a good chance. He'd come up and get the money from the girl if it was here. I was to stay outside and watch for Jack to come back and stop him. And I did. And saw him coming down the sidewalk just when Mark came running out, his face all black with rage.

"I was just stepping up to Jack when Mark shot him. I dunno why. I swear I don't," he cried wildly, "unless it was to stop Jack and me from getting together. And Mark slammed me over the head with his gun. Hit me two or three times and started running after Jack, who was out in the middle of the street. Then a cab stopped and Jack got in, and the last I saw was Mark running after them. Then I passed out. That's all I know. I swear it is."

He looked around the room wildly. "What happened here? Did Mark get the money? Did he hurt Jack's girl?"

"He strangled her," Shayne said grimly. "But he didn't get the money. He's still after that. Come on."

He hauled Hugh Allerdice roughly to his feet and dragged him to the door and out. The youth protested weakly, and then collapsed laxly. Shayne tried to shake him back to consciousness, then tossed his limp body over his shoulder and trotted downstairs. He went around the corner to his car, where he shoved Allerdice into the front seat and drove swiftly south to Flagler.

There was a patrolman standing negligently on the corner of Miami Avenue and Flagler, and Shayne, pulling in fast to the curb beside him, leaned over Allerdice's unconscious body to unlatch the door and call the policeman.

Fortunately the patrolman knew Shayne by sight, and did not ask questions or protest when the redhead ordered, "Drag this thing out of my car and get an ambulance for him. Name's Hugh Allerdice, wanted in Louisiana for murder of a cop while escaping a prison rap. Tell Will Gentry that Tim Rourke can give him the whole story."

Having said this, Shayne jerked the door shut and gunned the heavy car across Flagler toward the Southeast section.

The street James O'Brien lived on was in a quiet, middle-class residential section of stucco bungalows with neat lawns and nicely spaced coconut palms along each side.

All the houses were dark at this past-midnight hour, and Shayne drove fast to the second block from the one he sought, then slowed to fifteen miles an hour to drive past the O'Brien house. It was distinguishable from its neighbors only by the street number beside a driveway of crushed coral rock that led back to a detached, single garage.

Shayne saw no sign of Moore when he drove past the first time. He swung

wide at the end of the block, passed again on the opposite side of the street without seeing him. As he neared the other end of the block, a car rolled out of a driveway directly opposite the O'Brien residence and turned into the street behind him without lights.

Shayne swung sharply to the right and parked. The car came up behind him and Shayne got out to walk back while Moore stepped out.

He was a big, ruddy-faced, quiet man, and he shook his head at the query on Shayne's face. "Nothing yet. I was staked out in that driveway ten minutes after you called."

Shayne said, "Good. Send me a bill, Bob. I'll take over."

He strode away toward the alley on the side opposite O'Brien's house, and Moore watched him curiously, hesitating about following. Then he shrugged his shoulders and got in his car to drive home. He would, he told himself without rancor, probably read about it in the newspapers. He could use some sleep.

Shayne hurried down the alley to the driveway Moore had been parked in, then moved silently down it toward the street, keeping in the shadow of a high hibiscus hedge on his left.

At the end of the hedge he stopped and sat down to wait. It was peaceful and quiet here; the lives of the citizens slumbering here were normally far removed from violence. From his point of vantage, Shayne looked directly across the street at the white stucco of O'Brien's house bathed in faint light from the moon that was still low on the eastern horizon. The driveway to the left merged into gray shadow as it led past the side of the bungalow, but the double doors of the garage were painted white and showed distinctly behind the house in the moonlight.

It was past twelve-thirty and Shayne began to get restless. If it was going to happen at all, he calculated it would happen soon. But if it didn't, he was uncomfortably aware that he had no recourse except to spend the remainder of the night on guard. Having put O'Brien on the spot as he had, he couldn't possibly do less than stand by to see that the man and his family passed the night in safety.

It was nearly one o'clock when a taxi approached from Shayne's left. It was rolling rather slowly, as though searching for a house number, and Shayne watched it alertly.

It passed in front of him without slowing at all, continued past the next intersection, and finally stopped almost at the end of the next block.

Shayne moved forward warily so he could peer down the curb and vaguely see a passenger alight and cross the street. The tail-lights of the taxi moved away and disappeared. Shayne stood motionless with his eyes glued on the dark houses toward which the cab's passenger had crossed. If lights showed in any of them he would know it was a legitimate householder returning home late.

Minutes passed and no lights showed in any of the houses. Shayne moved back into his shadowed position of vantage and took up his vigil again, this time with every nerve fiber and every sense alerted to the immediacy of danger.

More minutes passed, and then his straining eyes saw it. The suggestion of a shadow sliding around one corner of

the O'Brien garage. His man had chosen the same approach as had Shayne, through the alley from behind.

Shayne got to his feet and moved silently to one side until a corner of the stucco house opposite hid him from sight of the garage. Then he sprinted across on his toes and up the lawn to the corner of the house with Gentry's Police Positive in his hand, paused there a moment to take in a deep breath, then stepped into the driveway where coral rock crunched loudly underfoot.

The broad figure of Mark Switzer was pinpointed against the whiteness of the garage doors as he worked at the padlock.

He whirled at the sound behind him. Shayne was moving in fast not more than thirty feet distant. Moonlight glinted on a blued steel barrel in Switzer's hand, and Shayne realized he had gotten hold of another gun since leaving his own behind in Lucy's apartment.

Shayne plowed to a stop on widespread feet and fired twice.

The renegade detective swayed forward and toppled to the ground before the sharp echo of the two explosions had died in the night silence.

Shayne ran forward as the big man scrabbled desperately on the ground, trying to lift the gun that was suddenly too heavy for his waning strength. Shayne put a big foot coolly on the wrist of his gun-hand and ground it viciously into the crushed coral. At the same time lights came on in the house behind him and a hoarse voice shouted:

"What's going on back there? Stand still or I'll shoot."

Shayne turned his head and called gruffly, "Police. Caught a man breaking into your garage. Is that James O'Brien?" he added.

"Yeh. Sure." The voice was uncertain. "But what the devil—?"

"Get some clothes on, O'Brien. We'll unload this carrion at headquarters and then take a ride to the garage where your taxi is parked. Got something to collect that one of your passengers left in it this evening."

Chapter Ten

And Cheap at the Price . . .

IN FRONT OF WILL GENTRY ON his desk at headquarters was an imposing stack of bills in denominations of 20's, 10's, 5's, and 1's, still in their original bank wrappers. Shayne sat across from Gentry with Lucy Hamilton beside him. Timothy Rourke was in the background with a wad of copy paper on his knee and a look of avid interest on his saturnine face.

"A little over seventy-nine thousand," said Will Gentry broodingly. "Bristow has certainly been going strong on the theory of not making any sudden splurge with cash to draw attention to himself. Hiding out in that dump with his girl and carrying this kind of cash around."

Shayne shrugged impatiently. "Maybe the guy was even trying to play it straight with Allerdice and keep the whole roll intact until it could be divided."

"Allerdice doesn't think so. He claims he didn't have a word from Bristow after he was arrested."

"Why should Jack have communicated with him?" put in Lucy spiritedly in defense of Arlene's brother. "He had

no idea Hugh Allerdice had bribed Switzer to help him escape. After he read about it in the paper it was too late, and—"

"How do you know he read about it in the paper?" Gentry pounced on her statement harshly.

"She assumes he did," Shayne put in fast. He poked his finger at the series of clippings lying on Gentry's desk. "Local papers carried stories of the escape, though they didn't call it that."

Will Gentry settled back with a stern look of disapproval that was only partially belied by the twinkle in his eye.

"I don't know and I don't suppose I'll ever know what you two are hiding. Maybe it's lucky Switzer died while you were bringing him in—before he could talk, Mike. I wouldn't like to think that Jack Bristow actually reached Lucy's place after being wounded and that you and she lied and covered up in order to get your hands on this money. Hell, if I believed that, I'd also have to suspect that one of you finished him off with a knife."

"You found the knife on Switzer, didn't you?" challenged Shayne. "With Bristow's blood on it."

"Yeh. And you had plenty of time to plant it on him." Gentry rolled his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "How come you were so damned positive Bristow had shoved the cash down behind the cushion in O'Brien's cab? How'd you know the girl's killer didn't get it when he searched her room? Or Bristow's killer hadn't lifted it off him when he cut his throat?"

"I wasn't sure," Shayne parried equably. "It was a hunch I got when I read O'Brien's statement about Jack trying to read his name on the cab license, and then asking him. As O'Brien pointed out, very few cab passengers ever bother. There was a man, shot in the belly and close to death, yet *he* bothered. Why? I could see only one reason for doing it. Because he was ditching something in the cab which he planned to recover later. I knew about the holdup and the missing eighty grand from Tim's clippings by that time, and I hoped Bristow's killer would figure the same as I and hear the newscast and come after it."

"If you were so sure of it, why did you have me pull my man off the rooming house and then go there to wait for Allerdice to show?"

"I was coppering my bet, in a way," Shayne said slowly. "Right then, I was convinced Switzer and Allerdice had planned the escape in New Orleans together, had forced Jack's sister to give them his Miami address and were here after the dough. But I didn't know which one had killed the girl or which one killed Jack. And I didn't know where either of them were hiding out.

"What I did know was the killer had tortured the girl before strangling her by breaking two of her fingers, and searched the room thoroughly. So I figured if either of them turned up later looking for the money it would prove *he* hadn't killed her."

"I suppose," said Gentry disgustedly, "it was the merest chance that Mark Switzer turned up at Lucy's apartment with intent to rape?"

"Why no," said Shayne blandly. "I don't believe that at all. It's evident that he saw Lucy's address when he strangled the girl, and guessed that Jack had gone to her. I think he actually came looking for the money, but was

so overcome by her charms when he saw her that he let himself be sidetracked."

"Nuts!" Gentry threw his soggy cigar butt across the room irritably. "What I want to know is where Jack Bristow went when he got out of the cab in front of Lucy's door? He was certainly headed for her place. What changed his mind?"

"I suppose we'll never know. We do know from Allerdice that Switzer started running after the cab carrying Bristow. He had the address, we can assume. Isn't it reasonable to assume he got there about the same time Bristow did? Grabbed him before he could get up to Lucy's place and took him off to bump him?"

"We could assume that—except he turned up later at Lucy's looking for the money. That's your own assumption, remember?"

"Yeh. There is that." Michael Shayne swallowed a couple of times under Gentry's probing eyes, then brightened. "Hell, there's an answer to that, too. Suppose he got there just in time to find Jack in the hallway and didn't know whether he was coming from Lucy's or going in. Jack might well have told him he'd been up and ditched the money—just to get rid of him. So he slit Jack's throat and carried his body off, then came back to collect."

"But was so overcome by her charms, and so forth . . .?" mimicked Gentry. "Okay, Mike. I'll hand it to you for having a fast answer for practically every question I throw at you. Like I say, I'd hate like the devil to come up with proof that Bristow was up with Lucy when we were looking for him. On account of that, you'd better take these along with you."

He carefully lifted some papers on his desk, slid out an enlargement of a partial set of fingerprints, and pushed them across the desk.

Poker-faced, Shayne picked it up and studied the typed caption while Lucy leaned forward anxiously and Rourke rose to hurry across the room and peer over his shoulder.

"Sergeant Hutton found those on a bedpost in Lucy's place along with others belonging to you, Tim, and Switzer." Will Gentry paused to light a fresh cigar. He studied the burning end approvingly when it was drawing well.

He cleared his throat and said, "I'm the only one knows they fit the prints we took off Jack Bristow's body. About this money, now." He touched the neat piles of bills in front of him. "There'll be a nice reward from New Orleans. You said something about the Policemen's Fund, Mike. How'll we split it?"

Michael Shayne got to his feet slowly. He put his arm tightly about Lucy's waist and crumpled the set of incriminating prints into a side pocket. When he smiled, the deep trenches in his cheeks were almost smoothed out, and he drew in a deep breath and exhaled it slowly.

"Lucy and I wouldn't touch a cent of it, Will. Tim will write up a great story about the brilliant police work that solved the case and recovered the dough. I feel quite definitely that every cent of the reward should go into the Fund."

With his arm still tightly about Lucy's waist, he leaned forward to grip Will Gentry's hand hard, then turned and went out the door, hugging her slim body close. THE END

His job: to investigate a cult. His method: routine inquiry —until he found a girl, young and beautiful, preparing to die.

But the Prophet Died

By William Campbell Gault

Chapter One

Golden Boy

FRIDAY, THE CHIEF CALLED ME in and told me I'd been assigned to Griffin's office. I would report there Monday. Griffin's the D.A. and he had asked that I be assigned to his staff.

Friday afternoon, Adele and I went up to the snow, for some skiing. Adele is a lass I'd been seeing a lot of for almost a month, a very well designed woman who looks to be eighteen some days and almost forty on others. Griffin is her last name, and she's the D.A.'s sister.

I told her about the change of assignment on the way up.

She smiled. "A promotion, would it be?"

"More or less. You put in a word for me, eh?"

She smiled, saying nothing.

"Won't I hear about that," I said. "The boys in the Department won't do anything with this. Oh no."

She yawned.

"Tell me about him," I said. "What kind of boss will I have?"

So she told me about him. The Griffins were an old Los Angeles family and her brother never forgot it for a moment. He loved this town and he was determined to keep it as clean as a town of its type can be. He needed the salary about as much as he needed another head.

"Sounds like a Boy Scout to me," I told her. "I probably won't make much money on the expense account."

"He's a realist," Adele said. "Don't worry about that. He's not expecting any Galahad. He went over your record very carefully, Sergeant Joe Parrish, and he rarely makes mistakes on personnel."

"How about you?" I asked her. "Any personnel mistakes in your background?"

"Nothing serious," she said. "None that brought me to the big mistake."

"What's the big mistake?" I asked.

"Marriage," she said.

Maybe she hadn't met the right man or maybe her money obviated the necessity for marriage. I didn't give it much thought; we were going up to the lodge for skiing, and I like to ski.

MONDAY, I WAS ADMITTED TO THE D.A.'s office.

He's a solid piece of man, this Griffin, about five-ten and broad as a chopping block. He has the most direct and cynical eyes I've ever seen and he kept them on me all through the interview.

Everything went well until the last few minutes. Then he asked, "Is Deke Parrish your brother?"

"Yes, sir."

He frowned. "He associates with some questionable people."

"I know, sir," I said. "Frankly, he's a gambler."

He continued to frown. "You see a lot of him?"

"Yes, sir." I paused. "But not his friends."

He was silent for a few seconds. Then he smiled. "All right. I've a job for you right now. It's been waiting for you."

It was a cult he wanted me to investigate. This town is full of cults and there isn't a hell of a lot the law can do about it. Some of them are operated by con men and some by crackpots and some, *maybe*, by devout believers.

In a folder on Griffin's desk there was some information he'd tapped a private op for, a man I knew.

"Take your time with this case," Griffin said. "Some pretty influential citizens are converts and we don't want any kickbacks. And you know how these phoney prophets love to scream 'religious persecution' at us."

I nodded, and asked, "How was this dick involved?"

"He had a client whose daughter was contributing very generously to the cause."

"She isn't any more?"

Griffin frowned. "I didn't ask. Why—?"

"Because if she was unsold, there might be an angle we could work on. It would take something like fraud to disillusion most of those fanatics."

Griffin sighed. "It would take more than that for a true believer. You check with this private operative on that."

This guy was located in a building on Selma, in Hollywood, a three-story stucco building of winding hallways and fly-by-night tenants. The office of *Burns Murphy—Investigations* was on the second floor.

Enter, the lettering on the door commanded me, so I entered.

There was no outer office; just a small, neat and quietly furnished room in which Burns Murphy sat behind a walnut desk. He was typing a letter.

He looked up as I came in and smiled at me. He's a lanky gent, fairly handsome and as honest as his trade permits.

"Well," he said, "what brings you here, Joe?"

"Children of Proton," I told him. That was the name of the cult.

"Ah, yes," he said, and chuckled. "The great god Proton, idol of the positive thinkers." He stood up and came around the desk. He stretched, and indicated a chair for me. "I heard you were going into the D.A.'s office. Golden Boy Parrish, eh?"

"I make out," I answered stiffly.

He grinned. "Don't ruffle your tail feathers, Joe. I knew you when."

"Let's get down to business."

He sat near me in a leather-upholstered love seat. "Sure." He looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. "What do you want to know, Joe?"

"Is your client still interested in the outfit?"

"My *client* never was. His daughter seems cured, though you never can tell about the post-hypnotic effects of this kind of thing."

"Uh-huh. What are they selling?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. No courses, no charms, no books."

"Well, then, what the hell is the pitch?"

His glance rested on me quietly. "I'm not sure it is a pitch. Maybe they've got something, Joe. It's about time *somebody* came up with a new religion."

"If it isn't a pitch, why was your client worried?"

Burns Murphy shrugged. "Wealthy man. Conservative man. They believe in the status quo. They like that old-time religion."

"I see."

I said nothing beyond that and the room was quiet for a moment. Murphy yawned. Then he asked quietly, "Are you Catholic, Joe?"

"I used to be."

He nodded, his gaze directed at the

wall on the far side of the room. "You used to be and I used to be, and these cults out here are full of 'used-to-bes'. Used-to-be Lutherans and Methodists and Catholics and Jews. All of them looking for something they lost. What they lost was their faith and now that the grave is yawning at them, they want their faith back. And it's easier to embrace a new one than go back to the old."

"Your client's daughter was old enough to worry about the grave?"

Murphy's smile was tender. "She's far from old. But she's scared. She hasn't any roots and no rock."

"The town's loaded with both churches and synagogues, Burns."

He nodded, and his eyes came back to meet mine. "Sure. Which one do you belong to, Joe?"

"The grave doesn't scare me," I said.

"Maybe women are your religion, Joe."

"Don't believe everything Deke tells you. . . . What you're saying is that this Children of Proton is an honest religion? Is that it?"

He shook his head. "I don't know if it is or not. I know the kind of donations some of the faithful are making. What I *am* saying is that my investigation didn't give me enough for Griffin to make into a sound case of fraud. But, of course, I wasn't working for Griffin."

He rose and went over to his desk for a package of cigarettes. He came back and offered me one, which I took. He slumped down into the leather love seat again.

"Nice office," I said.

He looked at me. "What did that remark mean?"

I smiled. "Nothing. Are you half-sold on this cult, Burns?"

He shrugged. "I can't seem to forget some of the lectures they were handing out. But maybe that's because the client's daughter was so sold—and I was kind of sold on her." His tone belied that "kind of."

"You make a pass at her?"

"I have some ethics, Joe."

And you're not so young and never were too virile, I thought. What I said was "Let's have a sample of the faith. What was the main gimmick?"

He leaned back. "Well, basically it's founded on the belief that God is energy. And naturally we *are* all manifestations of energy. I mean, we're bundles of atoms. Do you know what an atom is, Joe?"

"You tell me."

"It's composed of a nucleus around which the planetary electrons revolve. It's what you might call a microcosmic planetary system. The nucleus is positive, the electrons negative."

"So—?"

"So it should follow that you're more or less immortal if you consider yourself merely a bundle of atoms."

"Who wants to be an immortal atom?"

Burns smiled. "Maybe they figure it's better than nothing. The truly elect are protons, and the wealthier citizens seem to achieve this earlier than the others. But don't laugh yet, Joe. Wait until you meet Jeremiah Adams."

"He the head man?"

"And the prophet of the new electrical God."

"Electrical? I thought it was atomic."

Burns rose, and stretched again. "They're all related, according to Jere-

miah. Magnetism, electricity, gravitation, molecular action. I'm kind of weak on science, Joe. You'll have to talk to Jeremiah."

I stood up. "I'll do that. Thanks, Burns. I may bother you again."

He grinned. "Hope you do. I can always use a friend at City Hall."

I was at the door and opening it, when he asked, "What's the greatest mystery of our time, Joe?"

I turned to look at him. "God, maybe?"

"Could be. Nobody seems to know exactly what He is. And nobody knows what *electricity* is, either, Joe."

I shook my head. "You sound sold. Maybe you'd better have a talk with your parish priest."

"I already have," he said quietly.

Chapter Two

High Voltage

THE BUILDING WAS A LONG, low, broad place of Lannon stone in Brentwood, on San Vicente. In a stucco world, Lannon stone looks more elegant than it normally does. The built-in sprinklers were throwing a sun-dappled mist over the rich, green lawn that sloped up from the walk.

I parked in the curving green-concrete driveway. There was an immense parking area in the L of the building beyond me and a new Chev club parked in the drive before the wide, double doors.

I felt I should know the building; it hadn't always been a cult. . . . Then I remembered it had been a mortuary, the over-ambitious venture of a gentleman who hadn't realized how competitive that business was in this town.

In the shorter wall that ran at right angles to the long wall of the converted mortuary there was a door. The upper half of the door was glass and I could look directly into an oak-paneled study.

There was a man sitting behind a desk in there, facing my way. He saw me, smiled, and beckoned for me to enter.

He rose, as I pushed the door open, and he was standing in front of his desk by the time I'd closed the door behind me.

All I noticed, at first, was the color of his eyes. They were blue, but a blue I'd never seen before, and they had the intensity of a high-voltage arc. I was still lost in the eyes when the voice came through.

"How can I serve you, sir? I am Jeremiah Adams."

"My name is Parrish," I said, "Joe Parrish, and I'm not sure just how you can serve me."

He indicated a barrel-backed chair near his desk. "Sit down, Mr. Parrish."

I sat down and he went over to sit behind his desk again. There was a silence of about ten seconds.

Then he said softly, unctuously, "Something must have brought you to my door, Mr. Parrish."

"Is it all right if I smoke?" I asked him.

He nodded and pushed an ashtray forward on his desk so that it was within my reach. He studied me gently, quietly, probingly.

I lighted the cigarette and tried to look a little dumber than usual. "All of us," I began, "are looking for something, I guess. Maybe you've got what I'm looking for—I mean—oh, I don't know what I mean."

"Most of us are looking for immortality," he said.

I looked past the blue eyes, then, and was aware of him as a physical entity for the first time. He had a thin, aristocratic look about him, a Mayflower-descendant look. He could have been any age; he had a strong, finely-featured, unlined face. His suit was a heavy, silklike material in an Oxford shade. A dignified front man.

After a while, I said, "I don't know if it's immortality I'm looking for or not. There's so damned little to believe in, these days."

He nodded benignly: "Whatever you're looking for, it has brought you here. A man can believe in documented proof, can he not? It's a realist's world."

"That's true enough."

He studied me; the eyes engulfed me again. "We deal in realities here and in faith based on those realities. . . ."

I wouldn't swear he had hypnotic powers, but I don't remember any of the rest of the time I spent in his study. I came out with a handful of literature. And at the doorway, I promised him I would attend a sermon.

A new God for the atomic age. And probably a racket. But even with that brief exposure to his power, I wasn't too sure it was a racket.

I went to *Lippy's* for lunch. And from there to the home of Burns Murphy's client.

It was one of the big places on Sunset, not visible to the vulgar gaze of the commoners who might be passing by. It was one of the old places, built when Spanish was the architectural motif; the entrance hall could have been lifted from an ancient movie. Tapestries and crossed lances and pennants on the walls and a thread-thin Oriental rug on the tile floor.

The Negro maid said that Mr. Deering would see me, now. She led the way.

Mr. Deering was in a small room off the living room, a room that might once have been a sewing room. But Mr. Deering was now a widower. As I entered, he leaned forward to snap off a TV set he had been watching. It was one of those 27-inch screen jobs.

He was a short, stocky man with white hair and a square, pugnacious face. He wore a dark suit and black shoes and a dark-blue tie with his snow-white shirt. He, like Jeremiah Adams, had a first-family look, but this was an early-California version of it. The cars dimly heard from Sunset below were probably all tourist cars to him.

I told him who I was and why I was here.

His smile was dim. "Work for Sam Griffin, do you? I knew Sam would be interested in that rotten racket. He'll smoke 'em out."

"He's a fine man," I said. "A great public servant."

"And a true Californian," he said. "Where are you from, Sergeant Parrish?"

"I was born in Long Beach," I said.

He nodded approvingly. "I thought you looked like something. Sam Griffin wouldn't be likely to hire any trash."

"Thank you, sir," I said.

He took a deep breath. "Some town we're getting, eh?"

"It's certainly growing," I agreed.

"Unfortunately. Filling up with foreigners and colored trash." His burning eyes were bright on my face.

The room was suddenly close. I stifled the impulse to go over and open a window, to let in some sun and air.

The sick voice went on. "Another month, and I'll have my holdings disposed of here. Then I'm moving to Texas. There are still some of *my* kind of people in Texas."

"It's a big state," I pointed out. "There are probably all kinds of people there."

"Yes, of course. But they all know their places. The right people know how to handle the trash in Texas."

I fought to keep my voice even. "Mr. Deering, I came to find out if your daughter is still active in this Children of Proton cult."

He shook his head emphatically. "She gave me her promise. She has some modern ideas, Sergeant, but she loves her father and she's fundamentally sound."

"Would it be possible for me to talk with her today?"

He shook his head again. "I'm afraid not. She has gone to Palm Springs for a few days."

There wasn't much he knew about the cult; he wasn't a man who needed a reason to hate something. He promised to let me know when his daughter came back from Palm Springs.

The Negro maid had the front door open when I got to it. I asked her, "How long has Mrs. Deering been dead?"

Her brown eyes looked past me, toward the living room. "Three years."

"Does Mr. Deering spend a lot of time in that room?"

"Most of the time that he's awake, sir."

"He's not—sick, is he?"

Her glance came up to meet mine. "I guess all of us are sick in one way or another, sir. He's no sicker than a lot of others."

She closed the door behind me and I went over to climb into the flivver. It was the middle of the afternoon and the traffic on Sunset was fairly heavy both ways.

The high, narrow windows of the Deering house seemed to stare at me as I steered the Ford down the winding drive toward the street.

It figured that his daughter would be driven into a cult. Or to some more reasonable father image. It figured that she would need the warmth and sunlight of Palm Springs.

As I drove down Sunset, I remembered Deke's telling me that religion was a sublimation of the sexual drive. But Deke had a lot of crazy ideas. I thought of the resemblance between Jeremiah Adams and J. D. Deering and wondered if there was some subconscious connection between them in the mind of Deering's daughter.

Griffin wasn't in his office when I got back, but he was due any moment. While I waited, I leafed through some of the literature Jeremiah Adams had handed me.

I read about "positive thinking" and "negative thinking" and "neutral thinking"—all electrical terms. Neutral thinking was not thinking, according to Jeremiah Adams. These were the indecisive, the agnostics, the neutrons. The atheists were the negative thinkers, or electrons. The true believers were the positive thinkers, the protons. There were also converts from the negative or electron type of thinker. These converts were called positrons—because a posi-

tron was an electron (negative) with a positive charge.

The positron was the most recently discovered fundamental particle; I wondered if Jeremiah's cult had been founded before it was discovered. His thesis would have seemed sounder without this fourth fundamental particle.

The nucleus of the atom was positive, however; he had that on his side. The center of the attraction was positive and the center of the attraction was God.

There was a mention of Einstein's new attempt to bring gravity into the electro-magnetic field. How this would aid and abet the Children of Proton, I couldn't figure from the double-talk in the article. Perhaps only God and Jeremiah Adams knew the final answer to that one.

I heard a door close and looked up to see Griffin standing there, watching me.

"Well—?" he said.

"I saw three people and didn't learn too much." I lighted a cigarette. "I've just come from Mr. Deering."

"And how is he? Well?"

"Physically, I guess."

Griffin exhaled heavily. "I know what you mean. He was always bad enough. But since his wife died—" He shrugged wearily.

"This Jeremiah Adams is an impressive front man," I went on. "He's taken over that old Litter-Barclay funeral home in Brentwood. Some of his sponsors are right out of the social register."

Griffin nodded. "I know. And he's getting bigger, too. And that building is paid for. How did you approach him?"

"As a man seeking faith. That isn't too far wrong. I think he believed me."

Griffin's smile was thin. "You're not susceptible to this kind of—hogwash, are you, Joe?"

I said honestly, "I don't know if it's hogwash or not, yet. But I was born with a strong streak of skepticism."

"That's all I ask. This investigator Deering hired turned in an almost—*favorable* report."

"I know. I've read it. And I talked to him."

He stood there quietly a moment. Then, "Stay with it for a few days, Joe. Get all the background you can on this Adams. Find out what he paid for that building and who handled the deal. He's getting so big we may not be able to handle him if we don't nip him now."

He was standing by the window, looking out at his city when I left.

IN THE THREE-ROOM APARTMENT I call home I was showering half an hour later, when my phone rang.

It was Adele Griffin. "How'd your first day go?"

"I went right to work."

A silence, and then, "Working tonight, are you?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Good-by," she said.

"Now, Adele, you know I wouldn't lie about—"

Her chuckle interrupted me. "Of course you wouldn't. I was being malicious. Don't call me; I'll call you."

"I'll call you," I promised. "Be good."

"Maybe. Good-by."

"Now listen, Adele—" I protested, but the line was dead.

I heard the door close behind me and turned to see Deke standing there. Deke never knocks unless he has to. His smile was smug.

"Don't crawl, Brother Joe. She's just one girl."

"Nuts to you," I said.

His voice was a falsetto: "Now listen, Adele, I have the job with your brother. I don't need you any more."

"Go to hell," I said.

He looked at me in mock concern. "Joe—I came to pay you the money I owe you—two hundred fish."

"Well, pay it and get off my back."

He took ten new twenties from his wallet and put them on the coffee table. "Got any steak in the joint?"

"Take twenty back if you need eating money," I said.

He stared at me. "I don't need eating money. I'm loaded. I was just hankering for one of my brother's home-cooked steaks and a little gab."

"Sit down, you bum," I said. "As soon as I finish my shower, I'll fix you a steak."

He smiled. "Buddies, kid?"

"Relax," I said, and headed for the shower.

My little brother, Deke, who'd been an all-state quarterback in high school and then gone to SC on a ride. And been kicked out of school for gambling. He'd have been All-American for sure if he hadn't been bounced. Real poised. A cool, talented kid.

I finished my shower and put on a robe and went out to the kitchen. I had a pair of filets in the refrigerator which should be about ripe.

Deke sat at the kitchen table, drinking a can of beer and looking through the leaflets of the Children of Proton.

"Some gobbledygook," he said.

I turned on the broiler.

He held up a picture of Jeremiah Adams. "If this isn't a con man, I never saw one. Class, eh?"

"Know anything about him?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I must admit that some of my dearest friends are con men, but not many of them go in for religion."

"Or anything else on the right side of the fence."

He smiled. "Yes, brother Joe. How's the new boss? Easy to work for?"

"He's fair. If a man delivers, Griffin will stand behind him."

Deke yawned and went back to the leaflets.

The steaks were fine and the gab was good; Deke's first-rate company when he isn't sniping at me. We talked about the Rams and the Trojans, Mr. Peepers and Jackie Gleason, the new Chrysler and the old Duesenberg.

Then he cleaned up the kitchen while I went in to get dressed for the evening's labor. I had decided to go over to Brentwood; there was to be a sermon this evening by Jeremiah Adams.

When Deke left, he put a hand lightly on my shoulder. "You're all right, Champ. Thanks a lot for the steak." He opened the door and turned to give me his throwaway line.

"Don't lower your stud fee, kid."

• Chapter Three

A Well Stacked Neurotic Nothing

IT WAS A CLEAR, BEAUTIFUL night in Brentwood and there was a heavy stream of traffic on San Vicente heading toward the ocean. The parking lot was almost filled when I arrived at Adams's temple. I slid the Ford in between a Cad and a Lincoln Capri. Mine must have been the only low-priced car in the lot.

There was a Bentley in the row ahead that looked like Deke's. But then I saw it carried a New York plate.

On the terrace near the wide double doors, some of the faithful were chatting. I moved through an odor of fine perfumes and expensive Havana tobacco and went into the auditorium.

There was a single occupant in the foyer, a slim blonde in powder-blue gabardine, a beautiful girl, even by this town's standards. I was sure I had seen her somewhere before.

She smiled at me impersonally. I nodded and went past her into the auditorium.

Though this building ran roughly north and south, the seats within had been shifted slightly from what would be logical auditorium seating. One of the pamphlets had explained this; all the seats faced true magnetic north.

Phoney it might be, but any more so than a man being swallowed by a whale?

There weren't more than three rows of empty seats left. I sat in the last row, on the aisle.

As I said before, this is a town full of cults and off-beat religious organizations. This is where the evangelists blossom and the fanatics thrive. But rarely do any of them attract this kind of carriage trade.

The Constitution was on the side of all of them, however. The guarantee of religious freedom covers a lot of territory. Because one man's God is another man's false idol. So unless we could get *clear* evidence of fraud, there'd be no case to take into court.

Fraud does not cover voluntary donations and Jeremiah Adams was promising nothing but immortality. Griffin had no investigators who could report to him from beyond the grave.

This much I had to hand Jeremiah Adams: unlike some of his contemporaries in the trade, he peddled neither hate nor fear, bigotry nor hysteria. He was riding the wave of affirmation, positive thinking that had grown these last few years.

It was Dale Carnegie with a science-fiction touch, layman's psychology with atomic overtones. But the psychologist can help only the living. In the frightened 'fifties we are grave-conscious, and Jeremiah Adams was trying to remove the mystery from that, just as Freud had removed the veil from the human mind.

Adams had the voice and the manner and the phraseology to make all this seem as reasonable as rain. He kept that upper-class crowd quiet and intent.

But my eyes wandered, seeking the blonde.

She was in the first row and she sat almost rigidly intense, tuned to the mellifluous voice of her prophet. The thought came to me that if only I could sell her as completely as Adams obviously was selling her. . . .

A movie star—? I'd seen that face somewhere.

And then it came to me—I'd seen her in the society pages a dozen times. It was Eve Deering, the gal Burns Murphy had been hired to watch. The gal Papa Deering thought was in Palm Springs.

And what a honey to have come from that sick man in the bleak house. Her mother must have had the beauty.

And studying Adams, I saw again the superficial resemblance to Deering, that air of knowing you're from good stock, that poise that comes from good schools

and well bathed friends. Both of them had that almost unconscious smugness that leads to bigotry in some and a pretentious, patronizing tolerance in others.

And this father-dominated girl could be here for refuge or in sublimation, driven by a warped libido, seeking what? A real mixed-up kid—and Adams was the sort of fatherly but virile gent who could possibly answer more than one need in her. . . .

The prophet's pleasant voice went on and on. I don't know if it was hypnotism or some kind of vocal magic, but I had a strange sense of comfort, of *belonging.*

No coughing, no restlessness in the auditorium, all attention directed toward the prophet who stood at due magnetic north.

I listened and realized he was giving them faith without morality, salvation without ethics. Sin played no part in the sermon I heard this evening. I'd have to ask him about that. . . .

A number of the faithful lingered after the show was over. I went out to the flivver and pulled it into a deserted parking area where I could watch the door.

Out on San Vicente, the traffic was light, but it seemed jarring after the quiet of that auditorium. Cars started all around me, but in the half-empty building there were still believers lingering.

I sat and smoked while I watched the door. There were only three cars left in the lot when Eve Deering came out. She was alone.

She headed for a Cad convertible and I watched her get in and drive out to the street before I started the Ford's engine.

She had turned toward Santa Monica; she was almost a full block away when I came out of the driveway.

This is a town full of Cad convertibles but not too many of them are chartreuse; I followed it without difficulty all the way to the Hacienda Arms.

It was an apartment hotel overlooking the Bay. An attendant took her car at the entrance and she went up the steps under the striped canopy awning. I parked on the ocean side of the street and waited a few minutes before going into the lobby.

The clerk behind the desk had a small mustache and the bored air of one who deals daily with the rich.

I said, "Joseph Parrish to see Miss Eve Deering. Would you phone her apartment, please?"

Interest came to his face. "Miss Eve Deering—? I had no idea *she* was—" And then he frowned and went over to study the registry cards. He shook his head. "There's no Eve Deering registered here, sir."

"Well, then, that blonde in blue gabardine who just came in. Let me talk to her."

He stood there, frowning, and for the second time that evening, as I studied him, I was looking at somebody I should know. I opened my wallet and showed him my identification.

His frown deepened. "I hope there's no—trouble, sir."

"I hope so, too," I said. "We're certainly wasting a lot of time."

He glanced at me grimly and picked up the desk phone. He said, "Apartment twenty-eight-B, please." And then, after a moment, "Miss Dugan, there's a Joseph Parrish in the lobby to see you."

Another moment of silence, and then, "You *don't* know him? Well, he's—"

I prodded his shoulder. "Tell her I'm a friend of Eve Deering's."

The clerk sighed. "He says he's a friend of Eve Deering's."

Another silence, longer this time. Then the clerk nodded and said, "I'll send him right up, Miss Dugan." I thought he emphasized the "Dugan."

He looked at me bleakly. "Second floor, twenty-eight-B."

"Incidentally," I asked, "what is Miss Dugan's first name?"

"Eve," he said thoughtfully.

I didn't wait for the elevator but went up the steps, conscious of the clerk's gaze on me until I was out of sight.

The blonde had the door open and was waiting when I came down the hall toward her apartment. She had taken off the gabardine jacket and the thin blouse she wore was interestingly contoured.

"Just what is this?" she asked. "Who are you?"

I said calmly, "I'm a man who talked to your father this afternoon. And then, tonight, I sat and listened to Jeremiah Adams."

Scorn in the dark blue eyes. "Another private investigator?"

I shook my head. "A—well, you could call me a seeker after the truth."

Just a touch of interest in her faith, a touch of doubt. "Oh—? Do you mean Mr. Adams's—kind of truth?"

"I don't know," I said humbly. "I hope he has what I want."

Her face was guarded again. "How did you know my name? And why did you talk to my father this afternoon?"

I said quietly, "I knew your name because I've seen your picture in the papers a dozen times. And I was sent to your father by Sam Griffin. Mr. Griffin thought it was your father who was interested in this Children of Proton."

She stared at me. "Griffin? The District Attorney? You work for him, do you, Mr. Parrish?"

"I'm in his office."

Her smile was cynical. "Investigating Mr. Adams?"

I said nothing, trying to look misunderstood and patient.

Her voice was cold. "You followed me here. Like an investigator, like a policeman. And now you give me this double-talk. I think you're a fraud, Mr. Parrish."

I shrugged. "All right." I turned to go. "I'll tell your father I saw you."

I hadn't completed the third step down the hall when she said, "Just a moment, Mr. Parrish."

I turned back, and she said, "Come in."

She was close to me as I went past her into the room and I could smell her perfume. I tried to keep my mind official.

She gestured toward a davenport and went over to sit in a huge, upholstered chair. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Her throat line was firm and smooth.

Her voice was low. "Tell me all about it, Mr. Parrish."

"Griffin," I lied, "attended one sermon over there with his sister. His sister is interested in—the group."

"Adele—you mean?"

"That's right," I said. "She's a—friend of mine. Griffin told me that what he'd heard made sense, but that he hadn't heard enough to swing him from the Methodists. But he said that your dad

and you were interested in the group and that you two might be able to tell me more about it."

"So you went to see my dad?"

"This afternoon. And he told me you were no longer interested in the Children of Proton and *he* never had been, that he considered it a racket." I paused. "He also told me you were in Palm Springs."

She opened her eyes. "You make a big thing out of that, don't you, my not being in Palm Springs?"

I didn't answer.

Her eyes considered me impersonally. "You're a bad liar. Even for a stupid policeman, you're an extremely bad liar."

I felt the color mount in my face.

She said quietly, "I don't see the nails or the hammer."

"What do you mean by that, Miss Deering?"

"Don't you intend to crucify him? Aren't you hoping to nail Jeremiah to a cross?"

I said calmly, "I doubt if the carpenter's union would let me. Aren't you being a little hysterical?"

She sighed and put a hand to her forehead. "Perhaps." Her voice was weary and weak. "You've met my father. Did you talk to him very long?"

I took a deep breath. "Long enough."

She looked at me speculatively.

I said, "I'm not *that* sick. Not yet."

She looked past me. "If I'd heard 'yid' or 'nigger' or 'greaser' once more I'd have been sicker than he is. I'd have been institutionalized."

I asked quietly, "Was he different when your mother was alive?"

"Enough. He adored her. And so did I. And I adored him, then. Do you think I could have been jealous of her?" She seemed to shudder. "Why in hell am I talking to *you* like this?"

"People confide in me," I told her. "It's one of my weapons. Miss Deering, you're a beautiful, sensitive, and wealthy girl. In this town, that makes you a target for all kinds of beasts of prey. You must understand that."

"And you consider Jeremiah Adams a beast of prey?"

"I don't know, yet. He might be a saint for all I know right now. I did notice that he stressed faith in his sermon but *not* morals."

"Faith is for the spirit, morals for the flesh. Jeremiah is concerned with the spirit."

"It's an easy out," I said. "It eliminates the need for a conscience."

"I don't 'need' a conscience. I already have one. I'm looking for immortality, and Jeremiah has explained that in high-school physics terms. Matter is never destroyed or created, only transformed."

I stood up. "I'm not a theologian, Miss Deering. But matter is physical, not spiritual."

She stood up, too. "I won't argue. Jeremiah has what I want."

That could be. I said, "I would appreciate it if you don't tell him I'm from the District Attorney's office. In return, I won't tell your dad you're not in Palm Springs."

She glared at me for seconds, and then said quietly, "I make no promises to you about anything, policeman."

A neurotic nothing, I thought, heading for the door. A well-stacked hysteric, seeking an easy god. A pathological rabbit, running from reality. . . .

And then, just before I opened the

door, she said, "Just a moment, Mr. Parrish."

I turned to find her smiling.

"I won't say anything to Jeremiah," she promised.

WHEN I CAME DOWN TO THE LOBby again, there was another clerk behind the desk. I stopped and asked, "Could I see the clerk who was here when I went up a few minutes ago?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but he said he had important business and asked me to relieve him for a few hours. I don't know where he went."

"He told me his name," I said, "but I forgot it."

"Jarvis," the new clerk supplied, "Clyde Jarvis."

The name kicked around in my skull, trying to find a pigeonhole. Clyde Jarvis. . . . Hadn't there been a con man by that name in some recent case? Important business, the clerk had said. I wondered if the important business had been prompted by his learning who the girl in 28-B was.

I thought about Eve Deering on the way home and I thought about her father. And I thought, *We're right back at the beginning with Adams and Eve.* A man thinks some punchy things, riding around alone.

A hot shower helped.

In the morning, the sky was gray and it looked like we were finally going to get the rain we needed. I phoned Griffin and he told me to stay with the Adams business until further notice.

That was another advantage in working for him; I didn't have to drive into town every morning. I didn't have to punch a clock. That permitted me to work twenty-four hours a day.

I was just going out when the phone rang.

The soft, frightened voice of Jeremiah Adams came over the wire. "Would you get over to Mr. Murphy's office on Selma? You know where it is, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. What's happened?"

The voice was softer, weaker. "It looks like Mr. Murphy has been murdered."

"Phone the police," I told him. "I'm on the way over."

Chapter Four

Unseeing Eye

IT WAS ONLY TEN BLOCKS, BUT one of the black and white prowl cars was parked in front of the building when I arrived.

In the small office, one of the uniformed men was talking to Jeremiah Adams. The other was calling Homicide from a neighboring office.

I knew the cop who was questioning Jeremiah and I went over there.

Jeremiah was saying, " . . . asked him why he couldn't tell me what it was over the phone and he told me that was impossible. I then came directly over and found him like this."

Burns Murphy was slumped over his desk. I learned later that he'd been shot through the left eye, but I couldn't see his face now.

"And why didn't you phone the police?" the cop asked.

Adams looked at him wonderingly. "I did. Isn't that why you're here?"

The uniformed man shook his head. "My understanding is that the call came from another office in the building."

Adams looked at me and back at the

cop. He took a deep breath.

I asked, "Why'd you phone me?"

He took a deep breath. "I knew you were an officer. I saw your car the other night." His eyes were bleak. "What sort of business is this, Mr. Parrish?"

"How do you mean?"

His gaze went from the cop to me. "It looks to me as though I'm—being framed."

The cop smiled. I said, "You didn't expect to escape questioning, did you?"

Adams shook his head. "I wasn't thinking of that. I was referring to Mr. Murphy phoning me and then being killed." He took a breath. "And then someone phoning from the building. It seems as though the person who phoned wanted me to be caught here."

The cop said, "We'll be checking that, Adams."

Then the pair from Homicide came and one of the men was Sergeant Kafke. He nodded to me and then ignored me. I went to phone Griffin from another office.

I told him what had happened and added, "I suppose it's all Homicide's baby now. I had better bow out, don't you think?"

"Who came from Homicide?"

"Sergeant Kafke and a man I don't know."

"Let me talk to Sergeant Kafke. This *could* be tied up with the Adams business, Joe."

"That figures. I'll get him."

Kafke was no Joe Parrish admirer. When I told him the D.A. wanted to talk to him, he looked at me bleakly. "Why?"

"I forgot to ask," I said. "I'll go and ask him." I turned toward the door again.

"All right, comedian," he said, and went past me, through the door.

His partner was smiling. "What's with you on this?"

"I know Mr. Adams. He phoned me when he found Murphy."

"Know him well?"

"I met him yesterday. I knew Burns Murphy pretty well."

"Gambled some, didn't he? Burns, I mean."

"Some, I guess. I never gambled with him."

"Your brother has, though, hasn't he?"

I looked at the guy. He evidently knew more about me than I did about him. I said, "What kind of question is that?"

"Were you here when the uniformed man came?"

I studied the man for a few seconds. Then I said, "No. I was out ditching the gun. I came in later to snarl up the investigation. Relax, Dick Tracy."

"Yes, sir," he said mockingly. "Sorry, sir." He sneered and walked away.

Just one big friendly force, untinged by envy. Outside, it had started to rain.

SUICIDE WAS RULED OUT; THEY found no gun. And that convinced them there was no need to lock up Jeremiah Adams—yet. Because Jeremiah had no gun and it didn't seem logical he would ditch it and then come back to the scene of the kill. He was still number-one suspect, though, I think.

Nobody in the building had heard a shot.

And nobody in the building would admit phoning the police. That happens often enough; people give a phoney name when they call. Most citizens

want to be protected from violence but damn few of them want to get involved in it personally.

But to Jeremiah, this only seemed to prove that someone was trying to frame him. He was pale and grim when he was released.

I made out my statement at the Hollywood Station and then Sergeant Kafke had me called into a small room off the main corridor. He was at a desk, going over reports, when I came in.

Big smile to greet me. "I guess we got a bad start on this, Joe. Maybe it was envy and maybe it was the way I dislike your brother. Anyhow, what have you got I can use?"

"Most of it's in my statement, Ernie." I lighted a cigarette. "Except that I was investigating this Children of Proton. That's not for the official record, yet."

"Murphy was investigating them, too, wasn't he?"

I nodded. "For J. D. Deering. Deering's daughter is one of the true believers. I can get you Murphy's report on that; Griffin has the carbon copy."

"I'd appreciate it." He ran a hand along his chin thoughtfully. "Murphy always had a clean record for a private eye. Are you going to continue the investigation of this cult?"

I nodded.

"We'll want to see whatever you find, Joe."

I nodded again. "Naturally."

"Keep in touch with us," he said, and winked. "See you around, Joe."

I nodded, and went out. Buddies, we were now. Sam Griffin had softened him.

From the drugstore on the corner, I phoned Eve Deering. I said carefully, "A man named Burns Murphy has been killed and Jeremiah Adams reported it. Could I talk with you this morning?"

"I'll be here," she said.

The rain was steady; the gutters were beginning to run with it. There was some wind now, lashing the palm trees, breaking off the brown dead fronds. Traffic moved slowly along Wilshire; it was Dollar Day and lady drivers were out in force.

Near Bridlehaven, I stopped for a light. To my right was the Weimali Fellowship, another cult doing a carriage-trade business. And down in the older, poorer sections, other strange prophets were selling everything from vegetarianism to anti-Semitism. Great cult town, great crackpot town, L.A.

In Santa Monica, the traffic was lighter. In Santa Monica, there were fewer cults and more churches. An old-fashioned town.

But on Ocean Avenue, the luxury apartments on the bluff could have been lifted from Miami Beach. This was the tourist's end of the town.

Clyde Jarvis was again behind the desk. "I don't believe," he told me, "that Miss Deering is in. I know she wasn't an hour ago." His little mustache twitched petulantly.

I said patiently, "I just talked to her on the phone. She's expecting me."

He pointed to the phone.

When I reached her, she said, "Come right up. Hurry."

"I'm on the way," I said, and hung up. I met the gaze of Clyde Jarvis. "Get that important business handled last night?"

His eyebrows went up. He didn't answer.

"Don't get too cute," I said. "Stay as sweet as you are." I went up the steps

toward the second floor.

She was wearing a sweater and slacks and slippers. She had a drink in her hand. "I've been out in the rain," she explained. She nodded toward a portable bar. "Serve yourself."

She was trying to look terribly poised, but the hand holding the drink wasn't steady and her face was taut and worried.

"No drink, thanks," I said, and studied her. "It's a bad day for shopping."

She said evenly, "I wasn't shopping. I was walking in the rain. I like to walk in the rain."

I was damp from the short walk to the canopy from my car. I stood near a heating vent and lighted a cigarette. I said nothing, waiting.

After a few moments, she said, "Well, I guess everything's all right, isn't it?"

"What makes you think so?"

"Jeremiah phoned after you did. They're releasing him."

"And that makes everything all right?"

She frowned. "Doesn't it—?"

"A man's dead. Burns Murphy. He liked you, didn't he? He came into the case to investigate this cult and then fell for you?"

"It's not a 'cult,' it's a new religion. If Burns Murphy 'fell' for me, as you put it, he never mentioned it. We were friends, in a way, I suppose. He—" She broke off.

"He was half-sold on the cult, too, wasn't he?"

She nodded. "Aren't you?"

I shook my head. "Jeremiah's a little too calculating to be my kind of prophet. He checked my car when I drove off the other night. He phoned me as a friend at court when he got into a jam. He's certainly concerned with his own interests, isn't he?"

Her chin lifted. "If Jeremiah wants to continue his work, he must continue to survive."

"All right," I said wearily. "I just can't get used to the idea of a prophet scrambling for survival. I didn't think survival was that important to them."

"I'd rather not discuss it," she said. "Sit down and have a drink. Relax, Sergeant Parrish."

It was good whisky. I sat on a brocaded love seat and waited for her to say something.

Finally she did. "My old governess was a trained nurse. She'd been converted to Catholicism. And she told me it was because, of all the religious people, she'd noticed it was the Catholics who died the easiest. They died smiling, if they weren't in pain."

I looked at my drink. "Did she tell you that often?"

Eve looked at me quizzically. "I guess. Why?"

"Because people your age aren't usually so concerned with death. This governess may have given you a fixation."

"Perhaps. It doesn't much matter, does it? I was looking for a rock, and I've found one in Jeremiah Adams. Another drink?"

I stood up. "No, thanks. There's nothing you want to tell me, nothing you know that would throw some light on Murphy's death?"

She looked at me candidly. "Nothing. Must you go? I'm a little nervous."

"And I'm a little busy," I said. "A man is dead."

I went to *Lippy's* for lunch. Lippy is an ex-cop who had known all the wrong people in the Department. So he'd de-

cided he could do better with a bar and grille. Which he was. "Too bad about Burns," he said. "Anything hot on it?"

I shook my head. "Know him well, Lippy?"

"Fairly well. Kind of an honest guy for a shamus. Gambled some."

"I know," I said. "He gambled with my brother, I've been told."

Lippy smiled. "By Kafke you've probably been told. Kafke always hated Deke."

"It wasn't Kafke," I said, and didn't add that it had been Kafke's *partner* who'd voiced it.

I went from *Lippy's* to Deke's apartment and Deke was home. It's a two-story apartment on the Strip and he was sitting in front of his radio, a drink in his hand, listening to the results from Miami.

The rain had cleared and from the windows in the rear wall of his big living room, I could see the city, looking washed and new and smog-free.

I said, "How well did you know Burns Murphy?"

"Only casually. Played poker with him a number of times and he played for stiff stakes, considering his trade. I wouldn't be surprised if he had some big-money tie-ups." He leaned forward to snap off the radio. "Drink?"

"Not now, thanks. You knew he was dead, didn't you?"

Deke nodded. "Heard it over the radio. And what a phoney setup, eh?"

"I don't follow you."

Deke shook his head patronizingly. "Grade Z pulp-magazine situation. The private eye is phoned by a client and when the eye gets there, the client is dead. That's the kind of horrible corn that put those cheaper pulps out of business. Hawkshaw, let me give you a tip; look for a killer with a stack of old pulp magazines."

"This one had a twist," I said. "It was the eye who was killed. You don't know much about Burns Murphy, then?"

"Very little."

"And do you know a man named Clyde Jarvis?"

"I've heard of him," Deke said. "He's never been convicted of anything, but you must have some record on him in the Department. Blackmail and extortion and con games." Deke yawned. "Great guns with the ladies, I've heard."

After a silence I asked, "Do you know Eve Deering?"

"I met her at a party, once. I will give you your Adele and thirty-three points for her. Don't tell me that's your latest?"

I didn't think that was worth an answer. I said, "Why does Kafke hate your gaudy guts?"

Deke frowned. "Kafke—? Oh, that sergeant in Homicide? I've no idea. Maybe because I make a living outside of the law and my brother is the fair-haired boy in the Department." Deke rose. "Want some lunch? I'm going to broil a steak."

"No, thanks," I said. "I've some people to see."

He walked with me to the door. "You kill me. Beating your brains and feet to a pulp for your lousy pay. But good luck, Joe."

I didn't answer.

Chapter Five

Starlight and Suspicion

IN THE OAK-PANELED STUDY OF the temple, Adams was sitting be-

hind the same desk where I had first seen him. Again, he saw me through the glass of the door and beckoned for me to enter.

His face was gray and the brilliant blue eyes were clouded. I took a seat on the opposite side of the desk.

His voice was low. "I was released, as you see. I don't suppose that means I'm clear, though?"

I said, "It means you are released, no more nor less than that. It's a little better than being held, though, isn't it?"

He looked at me gravely. "You *are* a realist, aren't you, Sergeant Parrish?"

"I have to be, in my trade."

"Is that why you lost your faith?"

"My *religious* faith? It could be."

He said nothing.

I said, "Do you want to give me the whole truth of it now?"

"I've given it, and you heard it when it was taken down." The blue eyes reproached me.

"All right. What can you tell me about Burns Murphy, then?"

"I think, for one thing, that he believed in me. He was a man who desperately needed to believe in something."

"I see. And why did he come here originally?"

"Perhaps," Adams said unctuously, "if you'll forgive an old saw, he came to scoff and remained to pray."

I said evenly, "I think you know that's not quite correct."

Adams's smile was thin. "Then I'll change it to—he came to *snoop* and remained to pray."

"Did he admit that to you?"

Adams shook his head. "Not directly. I'm observant, Mr. Parrish. I'm interested in troubled people." His voice was gently accusing. "Next question, Mr. Interrogator?"

I grinned. "Interrogation is my trade." I rubbed the back of my neck, which ached. "My brother has a theory regarding magazines, if you don't mind a little levity. You don't happen to read pulp magazines, do you?"

His smile was warmer. "As a matter of fact, I do. I read *Starlight*. It's a science-fiction magazine. Have you ever heard of it?"

I kept my tone light. "I've read it. Do you read it for relaxation—or for ideas?"

He looked at me, saying nothing.

I lighted a cigarette, and asked, "Were you ever in another line of work, Mr. Adams?"

He nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"I wondered about your background, what brought you to this."

"You have a trick," he said, "of smiling when you ask your nastier questions. Don't do it; it's false."

"Yes, father," I said patiently. "And you have a trick of not answering questions that displease you. Don't do that, either. It encourages suspicion."

The fine face tightened and the blue eyes blazed briefly. "I'm inured, Mr. Parrish, to the suspicion and hatred of skeptics. As a man of God, I view these resentments very tolerantly."

A self-proclaimed man of God, I thought. "Are you telling me you're beyond investigation?" I asked.

He shook his head slowly.

"Then would you mind telling me what other lines of work you've followed?"

He took a breath and looked down at the top of his desk. "I sold newspapers as a boy and waited on table in college

and worked for a religious supply house after college."

"This college was a divinity school?"

"No."

"You never attended a divinity school, have never been ordained?"

"Not in the sense you mean, no."

"Have you ever been arrested?"

His voice was so cold, it almost seemed threatening. "I was asked that question down at Headquarters, Mr. Parrish. My answer is on file. If you've some charge to make, make it. Otherwise, I will stand for no further persecution."

"All right," I said, and stood up. "You were quick enough to holler for me this morning, weren't you? You may need me again."

"I sincerely hope not," he said coldly. "Good afternoon, Mr. Parrish."

"*Sergeant* Parrish," I corrected him. "Good afternoon, reverend. I'll be back."

Warm and quiet outside. The sun just starting to disappear behind the eucalyptus bordering the west end of the parking lot. Why had I needled him? A false prophet? Did I know?

The Ford coughed and died, coughed and murmured, and I steered it down San Vicente to Burlingame and up Burlingame to the cottage, so-called, of Adele Griffin.

It was a cottage of three bedrooms and three-and-a-half baths on a rise above the street, buried in bougainvillea and roses, a low house with a shake roof on the most peaceful street in Brentwood.

Adele opened the door and said, "Well, semi-stranger—?"

"Don't heckle me," I said. "It's been a bad day."

She pulled my face down and kissed me. "What's happened?"

I followed her into the living room. "I've been talking to Jeremiah Adams. Know him?"

"Some of my friends have spoken of him. He's a whiz-bang, I understand."

"I think he's a fraud," I said.

"So? The world is full of frauds. Rye?"

"Bourbon, if there's any of that I. W. Harper around."

She mixed me a drink and came over to sit next to me on the nine-foot davenport. She held my free hand.

"You're faintly sensitive for a lout," she said. "I thought that was illegal for a cop."

I said nothing, soaking in the quiet, and the flavor of the good whisky. It would be great to be rich, to have a house like this and liquor like this and no clock to punch or citizens to placate.

Adele asked, "Anything new on that Burns Murphy business?"

"Nothing."

"You're staying with it? Isn't it Homicide's business now?"

"Your brother wants me to stay with it."

She chuckled. "He would. So many of his friends have been converted. Though he can probably convince himself he's acting in the public interest."

"Don't be cynical about your brother. We need more like him."

"All right. Honey, you look tired. Why don't you take a nap, while I fix us a brace of lamb chops?"

That's what I did—stretched out on the nine-foot davenport and she covered me with a blanket and I dozed. I could hear her move around the house and I heard the maid come in and go

out into the kitchen and then I heard no more until Adele shook me.

"We have a visitor, dear," she said.

And I opened my eyes and shivered. Because it was her brother and my boss, and didn't this look good, sleeping in his sister's house on the taxpayer's time?

He looked troubled, as I swung around to a sitting position on the davenport. But it wasn't because he'd found me here.

He'd been called in by the Mayor, he told me. Some indignant citizen had put in a beef, some friend of Burns Murphy's.

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, first there's the fact that you and Adams found Murphy's body. And the further fact that Murphy had been working for J. D. Deering and I'm a friend of J.D.'s and *you're* a friend of my sister's. It all looked very weird to the Mayor."

Adele said, "Relax, Sam. Some citizen is always complaining."

"Who's the citizen?" I asked.

He shrugged. "A man named Deutscher put in the complaint for his client. Do you know a Deutscher? I think he's a private operative."

"I know him," I said. "But who's his client?"

"The Mayor didn't tell me."

"Oh? Well, this Deutscher is pretty solid at City Hall and it might all be cheap politics from our opposition. I'll check it."

Adele said, "I've made too much salad and I've plenty of lamb chops. Stay for dinner, Sam?"

He shook his head. "The Governor's in town. We're having him down for dinner."

Adele smiled. "Well, have a nice dull evening. Don't forget to laugh when the Governor does. That's the only way you can tell he's just told a joke."

"Thank you," he said coolly, and looked at her appraisingly. "Aren't you a little old to be playing the butterfly?"

We heard the distant slam of the front door before Adele said anything. Then she said, "Sam can be nasty, can't he?"

"It seems to be a family trait. Let's get those chops going; I've work to do tonight."

She sighed. "Eat and run. A three-word biography of my boy friends."

Chapter Six

Bar Fighters

THE PEOPLE I CHECKED THAT evening were all names that the District Attorney had given me as contributors to the cult. Only two of the bunch admitted having made sizable contributions to the Children of Proton, and these had not been solicited.

Then I went to see Deering. The maid led me to the same room and the TV set was again in operation. As I entered, Deering raised an admonitory hand.

"This will be over in a minute," he whispered. "I don't want to miss a word of it."

I stood there, listening to the closing remarks of Fulton Lewis, Jr. Then Deering snapped off the set and looked up at me. "Well—?"

"Burns Murphy has been killed," I said, "and another investigator has showed up in the case. The new man is Ned Deutscher. You didn't hire him, did you?"

J. D. shook his head, and sighed. "My daughter—Sergeant? Is she going to be involved in this?"

"I don't see how, sir. Isn't she in Palm Springs?"

He shook his head again. "She's in Santa Monica. She phoned me this afternoon." He stared bleakly at the rug.

I said, "She'll be kept as free from it as the evidence will warrant, sir."

"I'll rely on that." His bright eyes examined me critically. "Who is this—Deutscher, you say?"

"A private investigator with a number of friends at City Hall. Including the Mayor. He's rather expensive and I wondered who'd hired him, or if he was working on his own. He's almost as unethical as he is expensive, and perhaps he sees an opportunity to embarrass some wealthy people. I think we can rely on you, sir, as an ally of Sam Griffin's, can we not?"

"You can rely on me, Sergeant. I've a few strings I can pull. And in return, I'd be grateful if you'd keep an eye on my daughter. Good night."

I went out to the big hall with the thin rugs and the crossed lances. The maid had the door open and she was looking out at the clean, night air with what I thought was longing.

"Don't you ever get any time off?" I asked her.

Her smile was a small one. "Not nearly enough, Sergeant. Is Miss Eve coming home again?"

"I don't know. Do you miss her?"

She nodded.

I asked, "Did you know Mrs. Deering?"

She nodded again. "She hired me. She was a saint, that's what she was. A saint, married to that—" She stopped talking and her ebony face lifted. "I talk too much. Good night, Sergeant."

The moon was out, now, like a neon basketball, and the stars seemed to be within reach. The Santana wind had come in from the desert to give us one of those California rarities, a warm night.

I felt the need for a drink, and headed for *Lippy's*. I should have gone home.

Lippy was behind the bar. And as he slid a glass across to me, he said, "A big nosey bum has been asking a lot of personal questions about you. Wants to know about you and Adele, and the word on Deke, and if you've come into some crooked money lately. Nice, clean questions. I told him to dry up."

"Know who he was?" I asked.

"Was and is. A private eye named Ned Deutscher, and he's still sitting in that corner booth."

I was under control, I think, on the way over to the booth. It had been a bad day and I didn't like crooked dicks, but I wasn't out of control, yet.

I sat down across from him, and he smirked at me. I said, "You joined the Department, Ned?"

He shook his big head. "Why?"

"There's a rumor around here that you've been impersonating an officer."

He laughed. "Ain't that a howl? I heard the same thing about you."

"We'll call that a joke, for the moment," I said. "Who's your client, Ned?"

"Drop dead," he said. "You don't scare me, Parrish."

That was when I leaned across the table, and that was when Lippy came out from behind the bar. Lippy hates private dicks.

Lippy said, "This slob giving you any trouble, Joe? I'll bounce him if you say

the word."

"I can handle him," I said.

Ned looked between us and smiled. "If either one of you should touch me, I'd pull your spine out. And one of you would lose the badge, and the other his license. And if you don't think so, just start something." He started to slide out.

"I haven't finished questioning you, Ned," I said sharply, and stood up to block his exit.

He continued to come out and he put a hand forward to push me out of the way. I raised a hand to prevent it, and he swung.

He missed my chin and caught my neck. I threw a right hand for the middle of his big face and it didn't miss. I hit him twice more before Lippy dragged me clear.

Deutscher had fallen back into the bench he'd sat on. Blood dribbled down from his chin and his light blue eyes were burning with hate.

Lippy, pushing me behind him as Deutscher scrambled out, picked up an empty beer bottle from the table, and nodded toward the door.

"Get out of here, you cheap shamus. And don't ever come back or *I'll* work you over. *Move*, slob."

Deutscher went past him, mumbling, and all the eyes in the place were on him. Then, a few seconds after the door had swung shut, I saw a man leave another booth and head for the door.

It was Clyde Jarvis, the clerk from the Hacienda Arms.

Maybe the question I'd asked Deutscher had been answered. Maybe Jarvis was his client. Or maybe they were a team.

I went home and hit the sack.

IN THE MORNING, I PHONED GRIFfin again and caught him in his office.

"You'd better come down," he said. "The Mayor wants to talk to us."

"Why?" I asked.

"Your little fracas in that bar last night seems to have hit the morning papers."

The Mayor wasn't the only man present in his office when Griffin and I entered. Kafke was there and the Chief was there. Everybody looked grave except the Mayor, who was smiling. He's the kind who'd smile as he cut your throat.

He had a voice that seemed to be riding herd on an imminent belch and a way of asking questions preceded by a misstatement of fact that was supposed to confuse the person being questioned. Nobody in the room was confused; they all knew him. They knew he had stooges in the Department and the only reason he hadn't fired the Chief was the public was too aware of the Chief's record through many administrations.

I told them my version of the fight, and the Mayor asked, "Why didn't you arrest the man, if this is true?"

I started to answer, but the Chief said, "I think, sir, that this was a personal fight, in a sense, and it would look bad if Sergeant Parrish followed it with an arrest. Also, I think your honor is aware of the unwarranted prestige that Deutscher seems to have with certain officials of our administration. In my view, Sergeant Parrish would have increased interdepartmental bickering by an arrest."

The Mayor colored. "I asked the question of Sergeant Parrish, Chief."

I said quietly, "Chief Ames has stated a view I concur with, sir."

The Mayor looked at Sergeant Kafke, as though for support. Kafke pretended he didn't see the Mayor's glance.

Griffin said, "If you like, Mayor, we can withdraw from our interest in the Burns Murphy case and not interfere with Homicide's investigation."

The Mayor's color deepened and his voice seemed to come from his collar button. "That was not my wish. Nor Homicide's, I'm sure. I expect complete co-operation from all departments and all city employees."

Griffin smiled. The Chief studied his nails. Kafke said earnestly, "I guess I don't need to remind you, sir, that you have always enjoyed exceptional co-operation from Homicide."

The Mayor beamed on his stooge.

Griffin put in, "And I'm sure any investigation undertaken by my office will be concerned only with the truth and not with political pressures, and I'm sure that's what you want, Mayor."

The Mayor looked at him steadily. "That's right. And now I guess there's nothing further we need discuss. I suggest that we all return to our pressing duties."

We all went out, and Kafke caught me in the corridor. He said, "Maybe you and I had better compare notes, Joe."

Which we did, right there in the corridor. I told him about Jarvis being in the bar last night and he told me about a manslaughter charge that had been brought against Jeremiah Adams in some small town in New England.

"Was he convicted on it?" I asked.

Ernie shook his head. "It was a rainy night and this fellow stepped in front of Adams's car. The silliest thing about it was the deceased's occupation."

"How's that?" I asked.

Kafke shook his head. "He was an electrician."

"Maybe that's what put Adams over the edge," I suggested. "Well, you could check this Jarvis's background. I'm going to."

"Right," Kafke said. "No hard feelings, Joe?"

I shook my head. "I won the fight last night."

From Griffin's office, I phoned Deutscher's office and home, but got no reply either place. I spent most of the day checking some other wealthy people who had contributed to the Children of Proton. The total contributions were over a hundred thousand dollars, but not one of the contributors would admit the money had been solicited by Jeremiah Adams nor did they expect an accounting from him as to what he had done or intended to do with the money. They all seemed to resent my implication that contributed money should be accounted for by the recipient.

Three more times, during the day, I tried to get Deutscher by phone, but had no luck.

I took a shower at home and ate dinner at *Lippy's*. It's one of the few places in town where you can get a good filet for two bucks. One of the drawbacks is listening to Lippy's comments on the news of the day or yesterday, but I'm conditioned to that.

It was dark when I turned the flivver westward from Hollywood, toward the temple on San Vicente. And though I arrived there twenty minutes early, the parking lot was more than half filled.

Lady Eve was again in the front row. And down the far aisle, I saw the mountain who moved like a man, Ned

Deutscher. I wondered where he'd been all day.

The place was full when Jeremiah Adams came from behind a velvet curtain to take his place in the pulpit. He was wearing a silver-gray sheen gabardine, tonight, and he looked like a Brooks Brothers saint. Though there was a certain satanic cast, I thought, to his thin face.

He talked of faith, tonight, and the necessity of grounding a faith on some established and respected scientific basis so that it was not repellent to intelligent inquiry. And from there, he went to persecution, citing former prophets who had suffered it.

Not once did he mention the Police Department or the District Attorney's office. Jeremiah was above naming names but he made his implication clear.

There was, through some trick of lighting, an aura around the silver-garbed prophet and it seemed to me it grew brighter as he grew most fervent and eloquent. It could have been my imagination or it could have been a rheostat; at any rate, it was effective and the Adams spell was heavy in the room.

I looked over at Ned Deutscher and couldn't tell from this distance whether he was scoffing or praying. But the reflected light around Jeremiah shone on the face of Eve Deering in the front row. She was drinking it in like champagne.

Jeremiah's pleasant voice went on in musical cadence and he was certainly persuasive and apparently reasonable. And again, there was no talk of morals or ethics. A very comfortable religion.

Jeremiah finished with a prayer, turning his back to the audience and facing due magnetic north. And nobody laughed.

They began to file out, the perfumes and colognes changing as the well-washed converts passed. I sat there watching Eve Deering, still sitting quietly in the first row. And Deutscher, too, still remained in his seat, watching Eve.

When the aisle was clear, I went down to the first row. Eve looked up as I came closer. And she actually smiled at me.

I said, "You phoned your father, I learned. So I no longer have a sword to hold over your head."

"In that case, we can be friends," she said. "Do you dance, Sergeant Joe?"

I stared at her. "Not professionally. Why?"

"Oh, I thought we might go somewhere and dance and have a drink or two and talk over mutual problems."

This was too phoney to swallow, but I couldn't see any harm in going along with it. And some benefit could result. I smiled and agreed it might be a good idea.

When we went out together, Deutscher still sat there, and he, too, was smiling. Smugly.

Chapter Seven

Eve's Apple

THE SANTANA WAS BACK; THE night was warm and clear. Eve stood for a moment on the drive, watching the cars leaving. "Isn't he wonderful?" she asked.

"I guess, if you can believe him. Does he satisfy you?"

She smiled up at me. "Well—spiritual-

ly, he does."

This could lead us down some strange and pleasant paths, I thought. We went across the drive and made our way through the moving cars to where the chartreuse Cadillac was standing.

"You drive," she said. "There's a very nice small band at the *Pico Room*."

I held the door for her and then went over to climb in behind the wheel. As I was adjusting the power-operated seat, she asked, "When did my father ask you to spy on me?"

"Some time ago. He asked me to watch out for your interests, not spy on you."

"Is that standard police service?"

"I suppose not." I backed out and swung the big heap toward the driveway.

She asked, "Is that why you came tonight, to keep an eye on me?"

"Not exactly. Why did you tell your dad that you didn't go to Palm Springs?"

"I assumed he'd find out. I wouldn't be surprised if Mr. Murphy wasn't spying on me right up to the time of his death."

"Do you plan to go home now?"

"I don't think so. Though I probably won't stay at the hotel. I've a hide-out in the hills above Malibu—a place I've used as a refuge before."

Friendly, this evening. You'd think I was in her class and on her side.

There wasn't much of a crowd at the *Pico Room*, which made the dance floor almost usable.

So we danced and had a few drinks and talked. What we talked about mostly was Eve Deering; it was a subject that seemed to fascinate her.

I didn't learn anything that would help me much with the death of Burns Murphy or the possible fraudulence of Jeremiah Adams. I learned about Eve and her mother, Eve and her father, Eve and her sorority sisters, Eve and her short-lived stabs at the various arts. And I got the feeling that Jeremiah Adams wasn't answering all of Eve's needs.

And then, around one o'clock, she said, "This is monstrous. I've bored you silly, haven't I?"

"No," I lied; "it's all been very interesting. Shall we try another dance?"

She finished her drink. "I've a better idea. Why don't we drive out to my Malibu hide-out? You'd love it."

I studied her. My pulse was slightly above normal.

She smiled. "Don't look so calculating, Sergeant. It was a perfectly innocent suggestion."

I shrugged. "Let's go."

The Santana had held; there was very little chill in the breeze coming from the east. The stars were clear and only a wisp of a cloud was drifting across the face of the moon.

She drove, and she drove well, handling the Cad's two hundred and thirty horses with competence and imagination. She cut down to the Coast Highway at the turn-off a few blocks from the hotel, and I could smell the sea.

To our left was the water, to our right the bluffs of the Palisades. A hot-rod went blasting by to our left and its twin tail pipes seemed to snort at us contemptuously.

From a beach parking lot, a pair of headlights flashed on and a prowl car went gunning out on the highway, trailing the rod.

She laughed. "Kids. They have fun,

don't they?"

"I guess."

"The innocence of youth," she said.

I didn't say anything.

About a mile up the road, we went past the rod and the prowl car. The two kids who had been in the rod were standing next to their car and one officer was frisking them. The other was examining the interior of the rod with a flashlight.

"Hot-rod hoodlums?" Eve asked.

"It's hard to tell. That's what they're looking for, weapons."

"Maybe kids *don't* have fun," she said.

"Rich kids should. Didn't you?"

"Nothing special. The way I heard it, you could marry money. Is that true?"

I shook my head without giving voice to the denial. The lights of the Bay formed a curving line from Palos Verdes to Zuma. We went past the Palisades, Topanga, and to our left the scattered lights of the Malibu Colony came into view.

Before long we came to the guarded entrance gate to the Colony road. Eve swung the big convertible to the right, onto an asphalt road that led up into the hills. A sign read: *Private. No trespassing.*

As we climbed, more lights came into view along the Bay and the stars seemed to be getting closer. Overhead, one of the big birds was making the turn from International Airport and far out I could see the lights of a ship heading for San Pedro.

The road turned sharply; as the headlights swung in an arc they floodlighted a huge, flat-roofed modern house of varnished redwood and glass. The place was cantilevered out from the hill. The parking area was around in back, at a higher level than the house.

I don't know what I'd been expecting. Probably something rustic with sheeted furniture and bearskins on the floors.

This was nothing like that. This was a place of white leather, built-in furniture, and gleaming black composition floors. The living room was thrust out from the hill on its steel beams and there was plate glass on three sides, showing all the shore line from horizon to horizon.

"Well—?" she asked, as I stood there, gaping.

"It's spectacular," I said. "Do you have a housekeeper here all the time?"

She nodded. "She comes every day. She won't live here alone; she says the place frightens her." She turned and went over to a liquor cabinet built into the one wall that wasn't glass. "Drink?"

"Bourbon and water," I said. My voice was slightly shaky.

There are guys who can walk into a situation like this and stay urbane and make with the bright dialogue. I wasn't one of those. Or there is the L'il Abner type that seems oblivious to the obvious. I wasn't one of those, either. We weren't here for a game of checkers, of that I was sure.

She brought me the drink, and I managed, "I was expecting an apple."

Her laugh was quiet but there could have been some tremor in it. "Look at the Bay," she said quietly. "Look at the lights."

I looked while she mixed herself a drink. And then she pressed a button, somewhere, and music came from speakers nowhere in view.

Look at the Bay and look at the lights. And look at Joe Parrish, making time among the upper classes. Soft

lights and sweet music and a blonde off a calendar . . .

It didn't come out right. I like girls and some girls have liked me, but this was a girl who could name the time and the conditions without losing a single prospect. I figured I wasn't this attractive.

She was standing near me now, looking out at the Bay. I could smell her fragrance and her breathing seemed heavy. She finished her drink and went over to press another button.

There was the whirr of a small electric motor and matchstick bamboo drapes moved silently from their concealed pockets at the walled corners of the room. They continued around smoothly on their traverse rods until they had completely covered the glass walls.

"It's a little less like a goldfish bowl, now," she said. "Dance, Sergeant Joe?"

We danced and I didn't need the beat of the music; I had my hammering pulse. We drank and danced again and then she said, "We certainly *are* wasting time, aren't we?"

LATER, IN THE DARKENED DEN, she stood by the window that faced out toward Zuma Beach. I sat on one of the studio couches and smoked a quiet cigarette.

She asked softly, "Do you ever think about getting old, Sergeant Joe?"

"Not much. Do you?"

"Hmmmm-hmmm, I certainly do. What do you think of me?"

"I think you're a little mixed-up." I came over to stand next to her. I could see the road leading down to the Coast Highway and the headlights of a car making the swing a few curves below. I asked, "Is this the only house that road serves? It's a private road."

"There are a few other houses," she said, and looked at me in the dimness. "Do you think that car could be—?"

"It's pretty late. We'd better get out of here. We can watch the parking area from the kitchen windows."

"You go," she said. "I'll be there in a minute."

In the dark kitchen, I watched the dim glow of distant headlights reflect off the grass on the slope behind the house. They grew brighter and then disappeared as the car must have gone around a shielding bluff.

Then brilliance, and the sound of a climbing car came from my right, around the last big turn. The car was scarcely moving, now, and then a spotlight on the driver's side went on and sent its probing beam on the house.

I ducked as the focused light hit the kitchen windows. From somewhere in the house there was a squeal from Eve and the lights passed on.

She came down the hallway. "Who in hell was the voyeur?"

"I don't know," I said. "It was a new Buick Roadmaster. Is there a car like that in the neighborhood?"

"I don't know. My neighbors aren't generally that curious."

"That road continue over the mountain, or would they have to come down this same way?"

"It dead-ends on top. The car would have to come down the same way it went up."

"Let's move, then. I want to be outside when they come back."

We were outside when they came back, and I had the spotlight of the Cad lined up on the road above.

I caught the windshield of the Buick as it made the turn directly above the house. It was one hell of a spotlight; the two in the front seat were clearly revealed.

Ned Deutscher was behind the wheel and Clyde Jarvis sat next to him. There was a squeal of the Buick's brakes as the driver's vision was blinded, and I snapped off the spotlight.

The car had been turned instinctively toward the bluff side of the road. Now, it was righted and it went barreling down the hill past us.

"Know them?" Eve asked anxiously.

I nodded. "One is a private detective I had a fight with last night. The other is the clerk at your hotel."

"I thought I recognized *him*," she said quietly. "What does it mean, Joe?"

"You know as much as I do about that, I'm sure. Let's get going."

She got in behind the wheel and I went around to get in on the other side. She started the motor and turned on the headlights. Her voice seemed honestly puzzled.

"But how would either of them know about this place? Very few people know I own it. It's a sort of refuge, and only one or two of my friends know about it."

"Maybe we were followed," I said. "Deutscher was at the temple tonight. I haven't any answers, not tonight, Eve."

"You sound very official," she said. "A lot cooler, my good man, than you did a short time ago."

"I am cooler," I said. "And more official. Consider that I not only have no answers, I also have no questions, tonight. Let's talk about something else."

Her voice was weary. "I see. I've earned a brief respite, to use the cliché. Just for tonight, I will not be investigated by you."

"Just for tonight," I agreed.

There may have been further dialogue on the trip back to San Vicente, but I don't remember it now. As she pulled the Cad next to my flivver on the parking lot, she asked, "Still friends, Joe? Do we kiss good night?"

I leaned over and kissed her briefly. But the magic was gone and the reasons for her amity were clouded in my mind.

"Good night," I said. "Get out into the sun, won't you? Get out of the shadow of that house on Sunset."

"I'll try."

I got out and the big car went sighing off into the darkness. A fragrant flower from a sick world; I wondered what her mother had been like.

Driving home, I thought back on what had happened and wondered why. It could have been medicinal for her. Therapeutic. The men she admired, including Jeremiah, could probably not satisfy all the appetites of a woman as driven as she was.

A hot shower helped to lull me and I fell asleep—to dream of Eve.

Chapter Eight

A Hell of a Way to Operate

THE MORNING *TIMES* INFORMED me there was no development in the death of Burns Murphy. The funeral was to be held that afternoon.

It was a gray day, foggy and damp. I went down to the Hollywood station and Kafke was there. He'd checked Jarvis through R and I. No convictions.

I said, "He's working with Ned Deutscher, I think. I saw them together

last night."

"Where?"

"In Deutscher's car. It's a new Buick. He must be doing all right financially, don't you think?"

Kafke's face stiffened. "I wouldn't know. If Jarvis is working with Deutscher, it doesn't mean Jarvis instigated anything, do you think? He could be just a sharp operator who was in the right place when some people got into trouble."

"You mean, I suppose, that the right place would be the desk of the Hacienda Arms and the 'people' who got into trouble would be a girl named Eve Deering."

Sergeant Kafke's smile was ironic. "You sound indignant when you mention Eve Deering. Friend of yours, Joe?"

I looked at him levelly.

"I'll re-word it," he said. "She's a friend of the D.A.'s, isn't she?"

"He knows the family."

"Mmmmm-hmmm. And you are close to some members of the D.A.'s family? Or should I say *member?*"

"Easy, Ernie," I said. "Remember what happened to Deutscher. Is this the kind of co-operation the Mayor asked for?"

"Like the man says in *Dragnet*, Joe, all I want are the facts."

"You'll get all I have, Sergeant. And in return, I'd like those you come across, *even if they come from investigators outside of the Department.*"

The smile was gone from Kafke's face. "I guess we understand each other, now."

"Speak for yourself," I said. "I *always* understood you, Ernie." I turned my back on him and went out into the gray day.

I made some more calls on converts and two of the three I first interrogated resented my questioning. It looked like we had nothing on Jeremiah, no record, no report of possibly fraudulent practices. Nothing but the suspicion of possible implication in murder, and that hadn't been charged.

In Brentwood, I found a widow who had been solicited for contributions by Jeremiah. She was bored with him, now, however. There was a new swami over in Westwood who . . .

I sat for half an hour listening to her chant the charms of the new swami. When I finally found a break in the monologue, and rose to leave, she asked, "Is it the death of that detective you're investigating? Is that why you asked about Jeremiah?"

"No, ma'm," I answered. "We just want to be sure that our town's citizens aren't being bilked by a confidence game. But inasmuch as you donated money to the Children of Proton without being defrauded by unkept promises—" I shrugged.

"Unkept promises—?" She smiled bleakly. "How will we know if the promises are unkept? We won't be here when we learn about that."

"That's right, ma'm. If immortality was all he promised you, there can't be any proof of fraud."

She was silent as she walked with me to the door. There, she put a hand on my arm. "You're a friend of Adele's, aren't you?"

I nodded.

She took a deep breath. "I guess if I was as well preserved as Adele is, I wouldn't be so concerned with immortality, either."

"It concerns us all, ma'm," I said.

I had lunch at a drive-in and went over to the Hacienda Arms. A Mr. Gelling was the manager there; I asked him for the address of Clyde Jarvis.

It was an apartment over a garage, on the borderline between Venice and Santa Monica; the address would be Venice, which was within my jurisdiction. It was a half block off Main Street, on the ocean side.

There was a bar on the corner and I felt the need of a drink.

The bartender was a dapper little man with a tanned, bald head and an Oxford shirt of flawless white, open at the neck. I ordered bourbon and water and put a dollar on the bar.

"Clyde Jarvis drink here?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly. "You a friend of his?"

I shook my head.

"Cop?"

I nodded.

"He drinks here. What's he done now?"

"I'm not sure. What's he done before?"

"Nothing, I guess. No feathers on me, officer."

I sipped the whisky. "I hadn't noticed any."

The bartender shrugged and poured himself a small glass of beer.

I sighed, and said, "I should have stayed in Traffic. This Homicide's too much for me."

"Homicide—?" The little bartender stared at me. "Clyde Jarvis mixed up in murder?"

"In a murder *case*," I corrected him. "That private dick who was killed in Hollywood."

He looked at me with new interest. "Aren't you the cop Paul West talked about in his column, the rich girl's playboy?"

"If you believe Paul West."

"I believe him. These big-shots don't scare Paul West."

I smiled. "I guess nobody scares you either, eh?"

"That's right." He looked up at me. "I pay my bills and keep my nose clean. Who can scare me?"

I picked up my change. "Nobody, evidently. Except maybe Clyde Jarvis."

"Huh," he said, as I went out.

The wooden stairway to Clyde Jarvis's place ran up the outside of the rear wall of the three-car garage below. The apartment occupied the entire area above the garage, which made it sizable.

Clyde Jarvis was home. He stood in his doorway and glared at me. Gone was the impersonal, snobbish attitude he'd worn behind the desk at the hotel.

"Well—?" he said.

"I'd like to talk to you," I said.

"I'll bet. First you lose me my job and *now* you want to talk to me. You had plenty of chances before you lost me my job."

"I didn't know you'd lost your job," I said.

"Mr. Gelling just phoned and told me. That Kafke has been questioning him about me, and then you came a little while ago. He told me he couldn't risk the reputation of the hotel."

"I'm sorry about the job," I said.

He looked at me without interest.

"But you're making a big mistake," I went on, "tying in with people who are bucking the law. You can't keep your record clean that way."

He didn't answer. Contempt was in

his eyes.

"Haven't you anything to say?" I asked him.

"Not to you."

"All right, Jarvis. Let me warn you, though, that you're out of your league with Deutscher."

He nodded. "You've warned me. And let me tell you that I think you are, too. Deutscher has more friends in the Department than you have."

"And more in jail, too," I agreed. "Good afternoon to you."

I wanted to believe that he appeared frightened, so maybe that's why I did believe it. But his last statement had been delivered in a whining tone of voice.

A thought came to me, and I went back to the Hacienda Arms and checked through the telephone slips, the records the operator made of outgoing calls.

It showed me nothing, which followed the pattern of the day. Adams was clean, operating his lucrative business well inside the law. Jarvis was still safe from prosecution and Deutscher too shrewd and intrenched to give us anything to work on. I was wasting the taxpayers' money.

I was sure that if everybody I'd talked to had been honest, the murderer of Burns Murphy would now be apprehended. But then, if everybody was honest, Burns Murphy would still be alive.

It was near dinnertime and Brentwood is closer to Venice than Hollywood is. I drove over to Adele's.

She was in front, supervising the spade-work of a Japanese gardener. She looked at me anxiously. "Heavens, you look—oh, defeated, Joe."

"I am. May I use your phone?"

"Of course. And when you're through, mix yourself a drink. I'll be in in a few minutes."

I phoned Griffin and caught him in his office. I gave him a quick rundown of the day.

His voice sounded tired. "Nothing, really."

"Nothing," I admitted. "I'm wasting time and money."

A silence of a few seconds, and then, "I guess we've all wasted time and money before. Something will break. Stay with it."

I hung up and was about to head for the liquor cabinet when the phone rang. From the doorway, Adele said, "Get it, will you, Joe? I don't want to come into the living room with these muddy shoes on."

I picked up the phone and it was Eve.

"Hmmmm," she said. "A good guess. I've been trying to get in touch with you to tell you I'm no longer at the hotel." A pause, not necessarily pregnant. Then: "In case you wanted me."

"I see. Did you move to the Malibu place?"

"No, I've come home. Daddy does need me, you know."

"All right. Thank you for calling."

"Joe," she said quickly, "are you—going to be busy tonight?"

"I'm afraid I am," I said. "I'll phone you soon."

I heard Adele cough as I replaced the phone. I headed for the liquor cabinet, avoiding her eyes.

"Mix me one, too," she said.

I mixed a pair. When I turned around again, she had her shoes off and was sitting in a big chair near the fireplace. I handed her the drink and she didn't look at me.

Finally, she said, "Was that Eve Deering on the phone?"

I nodded.

"You needn't look so smug," she said. "Eve's no conquest. She's been on the town a long time."

"I wasn't looking smug; I was looking tired, remember? And please get out of my hair. Just let me sit quietly for a few seconds."

I finally broke the silence. "It's the way we operate that disturbs me. Threats and misstatements, pressure and intrigues. Why can't we just *investigate?*"

"The world isn't made that way. You're trying to protect the lambs from the wolves. That's something, isn't it? That's the way Sam expresses it."

"Maybe he sees it more clearly than I do. And he doesn't go into the streets and the alleys where these things breed."

"No, he's not equipped for that, either. But you are, Joe, and if you don't think it's worthwhile you should quit it."

"I can't quit. I guess I'm a born cop, and maybe that's nothing to be proud of."

"I'd hate to see *this* world without cops," Adele said. "C'mon, I'll give you some nice corned beef hash."

An hour later, I was parked on Sunset, watching the driveway to the big Spanish house. I could see the chartreuse convertible parked under the lighted portico. It had a transient look, somehow, as though it was the car of a guest.

It was a cool, damp night and traffic was light on Sunset. Over toward Wilshire, searchlights stabbed the sky; a new restaurant was opening. I smoked, and watched the lights, and tried to make sense out of the few facts I'd picked up.

Then, on the slope above, light came from the hallway as the front door opened. Eve came around the back of the car and slid in behind the wheel.

She came gunning down the drive and turned right on Sunset, toward the ocean. I let her have a fair lead before kicking the flivver into action.

I kept the big car in view all the way to the Coast Highway. Here, the big tail lights of the Cad grew dimmer as she sent it well above the legal limit. But I was still within sight of the car when it made the turn into the hills.

I didn't follow her immediately; lights following up that little-used road would be too suspicious. I pulled over to the wide gravel shoulder, and waited.

I was lighting a cigarette when the Dodge convertible came around the turn with a great squeal of tires and went zooming up the hill.

I'd only had a glimpse of the driver's face in the flash of a passing headlight, but it was clear the driver was Clyde Jarvis.

If it was a rendezvous, he must have called her after she'd phoned me. Because she had implied she'd wanted to see me. I waited only a few minutes before making the flivver the third car in the parade.

I drove past her place and parked on the grass beyond the turn. Wisps of fog drifted up from the canyon below as I walked quietly along the grass toward the house. Both convertibles were in the parking area and the light was on in the kitchen window overhead.

Something slithered along the asphalt drive near my feet; I jumped, snake-

conscious. But it was only a dry leaf from the eucalyptus tree on the other side of the road.

I kept to the shadow of the garage as I approached the door. In the complete shadow of the porch, I pressed close to the door and my hand moved out, seeking the knob.

The door was locked but I could hear voices dimly, though no words were recognizable.

And then, suddenly, a few words came through. Eve said sharply, "Deutscher—? He doesn't worry me. We've been persecuted before, you know—"

Was Jarvis selling out Deutscher? I pressed closer, but they were talking quietly again.

Silence, and I was afraid he was about to leave. I found an open door leading to the garage and went in.

Less than a minute after that, I heard the front door open and close and footsteps along the asphalt. Then there was the grind of a starter and the diminishing sound of the exhaust as a car drove away.

I still waited. I didn't want Eve to think I had met Jarvis along the road. When I thought he should be back on the Coast Highway, I went up to ring the bell.

From the other side of the door, she asked, "Who's there?"

"Joe Parrish."

She swung the door wide and music from the hidden record-player came out to greet me. "Well, I thought you were working tonight?"

I *am*, I thought. I said, "I got bored with it."

She paused, searching my face. Then, "Come in."

She asked, "How did you know I'd be here?"

It came at me too quickly. I took a breath and smiled while I thought. Then I said, "I was coming onto Sunset from Burlingame and I saw your car go by. I figured this was the logical place for you to be heading."

"Burlingame? That's Adele Griffin's street, isn't it?"

"She lives on it."

"And so you followed me?"

I lied with a shake of the head. "I had to see a man in Pacific Palisades. That's where I was going when I saw you."

Silence, while the unsaid things hammered in the room. Then she asked, "Drink?"

"No, thanks. Anything new you want to tell me?"

She met my gaze for seconds. "Nothing."

"Why'd you go home?"

"Dad's getting old. After all, he *is* my father."

I sat in an armless chair and rubbed my aching neck. "You know, if all the innocent people in this mess would tell me the truth, I think we'd know who killed Burns Murphy."

She still stood near the archway to the entrance hall. Her voice was faintly hostile. "Joe, you *did* follow me here, didn't you? Just as you did that first night. I'm a suspect to you."

"You had a chance to, but didn't, mention Jarvis," I pointed out.

"You haven't answered my question. Am I a suspect?"

"I'd rather talk about Clyde Jarvis."

Her voice was thin and cold. "Yes, Sergeant. Mr. Jarvis came to warn me that a man named Deutscher is out to

get fabricated evidence of fraud against Jeremiah Adams. Mr. Jarvis wanted to warn me that this Deutscher has some very influential connections in this town."

"Couldn't he tell you that at home? Did you have to come here?"

"I didn't think talk about Jeremiah Adams would be welcome in my father's house."

"I think you're lying," I said.

She glared at me. "You can think what you want. Dad's sick. His heart wouldn't take the kind of information Mr. Jarvis brought me."

"Your dad's heart is bad?"

She nodded.

I said, "Maybe he wouldn't be able to listen to another kind of story, either. I mean the story Jarvis knew about your being away from the hotel at the time Burns Murphy died."

Somewhere, a circulating fan went on with a soft *swish* and heat drifted out from the register overhead.

"Last night," Eve said, "you didn't have any questions or accusations."

I stood up. "That's right. And maybe last night disqualifies me as your interrogator. I'll turn this part of it over to some other police officer. I hope he'll be as fair."

I was at the door when she said, "Sergeant, are you going to talk about this to my father?"

"Not tonight," I said, and went out.

Before the door closed, she had started to cry.

THE FOG WAS HEAVIER, NOW, flowing in over the rim of the canyon, haloing the lights from the kitchen window. Above the ground-clinging fog, I could see a few stars.

Women, women, women, the truth isn't in 'em . . .

The windshield of the flivver was running with moisture; I wiped it off with a rag from the glove compartment. It was slow going through the fog to the Coast Highway.

Well, I'd been a bad cop last night and that could impede the search for truth. Or such truth as might be available. Last night had been a mistake, but I knew I couldn't be any different if the same situation should arise again.

The apartment smelled stale and felt cold. I turned on the big wall heater and opened the windows. I was tired and jumpy and a hot shower helped very little. I drank some whisky in hot water and sugar and put an extra blanket on the bed.

It wasn't enough; I was still cold, a huddled hunk of quivering cop. As cold as Burns Murphy, now safe from this world's minor defeats. Burns had met the big defeat.

Well, it was Homicide's baby. I stretched and arched my back and counted soldiers in ranks, thieves in a line-up. I was half-asleep, half-awake when my phone rang.

"Joe?"

"Right."

"This is Ernie Kafke. I'm over at that cult on San Vicente. Maybe you'd better come over."

"Why? What's happened?"

"Adams has been killed."

Chapter Nine

Death of a Minor Deity

THE BODY WAS STILL THERE when I arrived and a photographer was taking pictures. Jeremiah Adams

lay spread-eagled on the floor of his study, like a man nailed to a horizontal cross.

"Shot twice," Kafke said. "Head and neck."

"Is that the natural way for a shot man to fall?" I asked.

Kafke shrugged. "Natural? What's natural? What do you mean?"

"He looks like he's nailed to a cross," I said.

Kafke frowned at me. "Are you punchy, or something? You look sick, Joe."

"I am sick. Who found him?"

"One of the faithful. I guess the church door is always open and she came over to pray. Went past this doorway and the light was on. Can't you smell it? She let go all over the drive out there."

She came to pray and remained to vomit, I thought. I asked, "How long has he been dead?"

The boys in white came in and Kafke moved over to give them room. "I don't know yet, for sure. Not very damned long, I'd say. He's still limp."

"Did the woman see anyone but Adams?"

"She said there was a new Dodge convertible parked out at the curb and a man with a small mustache standing on the walk next to the car when she first came up to pray."

"Jarvis," I said. "Clyde Jarvis. You've got the call out for him, I suppose?"

"Sure thing."

A flash bulb flared and Ernie and I went out into the drive to give the boys room to maneuver the body through the doorway.

A *Times* reporter came over to ask, "Any leads, Sergeant Kafke? Or the standard baloney?"

"Standard *Times* baloney," Kafke answered. "The suspect is a fifth-amendment Democrat. Drop dead, Cregus."

"Not me," the reporter said. "You might be put on the case."

More flash bulbs, and then Annabelle Compt, the *Mirror's* sidesaddle Galahad, came up from her car at the curb. I got out of her sight, back into the study.

There was a magazine on the desk, a science-fiction magazine called *Starlight*. The outline of the body had been chalked on the maroon carpeting, a rough cross.

I was studying the letters piled neatly in a basket atop the desk when Kafke came in. He looked slightly penitent. "This ends your interest in the case, doesn't it? The Children of Proton won't go on without Adams."

"I suppose not. I'll have to get the word from Griffin as to whether this ends our participation in the investigation."

Kafke took a deep breath and expelled it. "You tell him I can always use an extra hand."

That was some admission from Kafke. I said, "I'll do that. I'd like to get some sleep, now, though. I've a cold coming on."

He smiled. "Okay, Joe."

I went out, through the newsmen still lingering, through the curious who had been attracted by the police cars and the hubbub. I was just climbing into the flivver when Deutscher's Buick pulled up behind me.

I went back. He was alone in the car. He looked at me without speaking.

"You're up late, Ned," I said.

"I often am. What's happened?"

"Don't you know, Ned?"

He looked over toward the temple and back at me. "Don't be coy with me, Sergeant. How would I know?"

"Adams has been killed."

"How?"

"Shot. What are you doing in this end of town at this time of night?"

"Talking to you. Is there something illegal about driving up this street?"

"No, but there's something damned fishy about you being here now. Your office isn't over here, nor your home. Where's Jarvis?"

"How do I know? Look, Joe, I've got a radio in this car that can get the police band and I heard the call go out. So I came over."

"As long as you're keeping tabs on the Department on your radio, Ned," I asked him, "why don't you work with us all the way?"

He smiled. "I always do. That's why I'm so solid at City Hall."

"You *were* solid. If you're involved in this like I think you are, you won't be able to operate. Because it'll cost you your license."

I left him on that line. I climbed into the flivver and drove directly home and went to bed. I was cold and sick.

THE DEATH OF JEREMIAH ADAMS got the full theatrical splash in the morning papers. There were pictures of the temple and the study and of Adams in the pulpit, the aura of light around him.

My phone rang, and it was Griffin. "Well," he said, "our problem is solved, isn't it?"

"Yes. But Sergeant Kafke asked me to tell you he can use all the help he can get."

A moment's pause, and then: "Humble, eh? All right, give him a few more days." Then, "Joe, you're not sick, are you? You sound sick."

"A cold, that's all."

"Take care of yourself, Joe. You don't have to work around the clock, you know."

Genial he was, this morning. An almost impossible situation resolved with a bullet and he could devote himself to more vulnerable rackets.

I phoned Kafke and learned it had been the same gun for the two kills. And that they had a record of Adams's last meal and thus knew when he'd died. That almost cleared Eve, because I'd had her under observation most of that time. And the same gun would seem to rule out Clyde Jarvis, because he'd been at the desk of the hotel when Burns Murphy had died. But Jarvis was suddenly unavailable.

I took some nose drops and went out into a damp and cheerless day.

In the corner saloon in Venice, the little bartender was as bald, tanned, and taciturn as ever. He told me he hadn't seen Clyde Jarvis for two days.

"If you do see him," I explained carefully, "tell him he's making a big mistake in hiding out. He's clear on both murders, as far as I can see. You can tell him I had him under observation almost exactly at the time Jeremiah Adams died. I'm his alibi, more or less."

The bartender sniffed.

"It's important to *him*," I emphasized.

"Okay, copper, I'll tell him."

Then, climbing back into the flivver, a thought struck me about those telephone slips. I tried to remember if the time of day had been noted on the outgoing calls.

At the hotel, Mr. Gelling and I went

through the slips and there was no time of day noted on them.

But he picked out the one I was most interested in and said, "This call must have been made after nine o'clock in the evening. It bears the initials of the operator and that's when she comes on duty."

The flivver seemed to steer itself toward Beverly Hills and the old Spanish home of the Deerings.

There was a new Merc in the driveway and the insignia above the license plate identified it as a doctor's car. His name and address were behind celluloid on the steering column and I jotted it down.

At the door, I asked the maid, "Is Miss Deering ill?"

She shook her head. "It's Mr. Deering. Eve has left us again."

"Another argument?"

She smiled and said nothing.

"What's wrong with Mr. Deering?"

"A cold, and generally rundown. Sergeant, if you see Miss Deering, I'd appreciate any word about her. She seemed terribly frightened when she left."

"I'll phone you," I promised. "What is your name?"

"Ramsay," she told me. "Sarah Jean Ramsay. You don't think Miss Eve is involved in—these horrible things that have happened, do you, Sergeant?"

"I don't know," I said. "Her God was killed last night, and it's bound to be a shock to her. Do you think she went to Malibu?"

"I suppose," Sarah Jean said wearily. "It's always been her doll house, her nursery."

Through Beverly Hills and Brentwood the flivver hummed, down to the now familiar Coast Highway. I kept the accelerator down and the hundred and thirty horses answered, the eight thumping tubes sang in effort.

Up the winding road to Eve's doll house, squealing on the turns. The Cad was in the parking area; I pulled the Ford up behind it.

There was no answer to my pressure on the bell button. I went around on the grass to look into the living room.

She sat in a huge armless chair, a drink in her hand, her body still as death, her unseeing stare directed through the glass wall that overlooked the Colony.

Not a move from her. And then I saw the almost imperceptible rise and fall of her bosom. She was breathing; but she was plainly in shock.

The door was locked. I found a ladder in the garage and a kitchen window open above my head. It only took a few seconds to pull the tension screen from its moorings.

I made considerable noise climbing in, but Eve still sat in the same position when I came into the living room.

"Eve," I said sharply, "look at me!"

Her head swiveled woodenly and her blank eyes met my gaze. "He's dead," she said hoarsely. "Dead, dead, dead—"

The glass trembled in her hand and I went over to take it from her. "Eve, he was prepared to die. That's what he tried to teach you, preparation for death."

"Murdered," she said. "Dead, dead, dead, dead—"

She stared and stared and then she began to lean forward in the armless chair. I caught her before she hit the floor. I carried her to the davenport and then went to get a quilt from the bedroom to cover her.

I phoned the Deering home and the maid answered. "Sarah Jean," I said, "is the doctor still there?"

"No, Sergeant, he left a few minutes ago. What's wrong?"

"Miss Deering is in shock and she's been drinking. Could you phone that doctor and have him sent up here to the Malibu place?"

"I'll get him or another," she said. "Sergeant, Miss Eve—she's going to be all right, isn't she?"

"She's going to be all right," I promised. "Hurry, Sarah."

EVE WAS DROWSING. AN HOUR later, when the Merc came up the road from the Highway. It was the same doctor—a Dr. Delavarum.

He said, "The death of this—this Adams person has been a horrible shock to her. I've sent for a nurse to come here. I'd appreciate it if you could stay until she arrives."

I said I would, and went in to turn down the thermostat. Eve had evidently set it at the top when she came in. I washed my sweaty face and came back to the living room.

Doctor Delavarum was writing out a list of instructions for the nurse. He told me, "I'm due at the hospital right now. But the nurse has been with Miss Deering before. She's perfectly competent to handle anything that's likely to come up."

I nodded, and asked, "How bad is Mr. Deering's heart?"

He frowned. "It's not—*bad*. It's exceptionally sound for a man of his age. Did you have some idea it was weak?"

"I must have misunderstood," I said.

The Merc went down the hill again and I sat by the window, watching the traffic on the Highway. Eve mumbled, and turned over. Then, after about twenty minutes, a car came off the Highway and up the private road.

A few minutes later, I went to the door and the woman there identified herself as the nurse. She was thin and blue-eyed, her gray hair cut short. Her voice was a New England nasal.

She came in and asked, "Are you a friend of Miss Deering's, Mr. Parrish?"

"Yes. You can tell her when she wakens that I'll phone her."

Eve moaned quietly, and both of us looked that way, but there was no further sound nor movement.

It was the rawest kind of luck that I went home for lunch. Deke caught me there on the phone, and told me, "Jarvis called me. He's been trying to get you. He talked to some bartender, evidently, and the bartender told him you were Jarvis's alibi. But he doesn't mean to give himself up and be railroaded."

"Nobody can guarantee him immunity."

"Don't tell me, tell him. If you stay home, he'll try and phone you there."

I hung up and then picked up the phone again to call Kafke. I didn't get him, but I got his partner and told him about Jarvis's message. I told him I'd be home, waiting.

"Okay," he said. "Thanks for calling."

Very matter of fact he was, like a man taking a census report. The sly slob.

I mixed a pitcher of lemonade and lay on the davenport, waiting. While, unknown to me, Kafke's cute buddies put a tap on my phone.

The call came around four o'clock. "Parrish? This is Jarvis. What can you promise me?"

"Nothing. You know that. I can promise you won't be railroaded or sweated. But nobody will promise you immunity for anything important you might have done. What are you afraid of?"

"Deutscher, for one thing. I figured I was working with him, but he never works *with* anybody, does he?"

"That's his reputation. Why should he scare you?"

"He's solid with the Department, isn't he? And he's sour on me. He'd love to stick me, the bastard."

This was quite a change from the snobbish smoothie behind the hotel desk. I asked, "Do you know who killed Jeremiah Adams, Clyde?"

"No, I don't. I've some things you might not know that might help you find out, but I don't know who killed him."

"You were there, though, at the cult that night, like the woman claimed."

"I was there. I wanted to talk to Adams. I looked in and saw him like that and I meant to go to a phone and call the police. But I didn't want to do it from his office. For all I knew, the killer might have still been in there and—"

His voice broke off and I heard dimly the sound of a siren from his end of the wire.

"You bastard," he said.

"Don't get jumpy, Clyde. It's probably got nothing to do with you. I'm no double-crosser."

I could hear the siren get closer and then he called me a name considerably worse than his previous one and the line went dead.

I phoned Homicide, and asked for Sergeant Kafke. He was out on a call and what could they do for me?

"You can tell me the address of the call," I said.

The man on the phone got cute about that, so I asked to talk to Captain MacDarrel.

A pompous man, a political appointment, Captain MacDarrel. I told him what had happened.

He said solemnly, "We don't bargain with murder suspects, Sergeant Parrish."

"I'm not complaining about that. I worked with Kafke in good faith. He violated that faith. I want to know where Jarvis phoned from so that I can go down and see that Kafke doesn't botch it up any more than he already has."

Ice in MacDarrel's voice: "Sergeant Kafke is an efficient officer, Parrish. I'm sure we can trust him to take care of it without your help."

"All right," I said. "I'll have to explain this to the Chief and to the Mayor. It violates the spirit of an agreement we made. Good-by."

"Don't be insolent, Sergeant."

"To the Mayor? Of course not, sir. Good-by." I hung up.

It was almost two minutes before the phone rang again. It wasn't the Captain on the wire; it was one of his stooges and he gave me the address in a businesslike monotone.

It was the bar near Jarvis's apartment. And that rang a bell in me. Neither the voice nor the phraseology had been definitely that of Jarvis. I had a hunch Jarvis had played it smart.

I phoned the saloon and Kafke's partner answered. I said, "This is Parrish. Why the double-cross?"

"You'd have to ask Sergeant Kafke, Joe."

"Well, put him on."

"He's—busy right now."

"I see. Did you get Jarvis?"

"Not yet. He can't be far from here, though. We've got the neighborhood covered like a casserole dish. We'll get him."

"Huh!" I said, and hung up.

I waited a while, finishing the lemonade and taking some more nose drops, before driving down to Venice. That took more time than I'd figured, as the aircraft plants let out a little after four and I was smack in the middle of that traffic.

By the time I got to the bar, not even Kafke was still there. There were some working men drinking beer with a couple of factory girls, but they were at tables. No one was in front of the bar.

Behind the bar, my bald and natty friend looked at me with open hostility.

I said, "They double-crossed me."

"What's your order?"

"Bourbon and water. You fooled them, didn't you?"

He was reaching for the bottle, but he paused at the question and turned to look at me sharply. Then he continued the movement and brought the bottle to the bar.

"I thought it was your voice," I went on casually. "Jarvis briefs you over the phone; you phone me and call yourself Jarvis. The law comes screaming in and finds an empty place. *Except for the bartender.* What'd you tell them?"

He looked at me belligerently. "The *truth*, Sergeant. I told them that Jarvis phoned you from that phone over there on the wall. It's the only phone in the place. I meant to tell the police about it as soon as Jarvis was through and out of here. I never got the chance. Jarvis heard the siren and went running out that way." He pointed toward the back door.

"Some story," I said.

"It's the only one that's true."

"Don't be silly. How much did he pay you?"

His voice was suddenly shrill. "Don't come into my place of business and call me a liar!"

From one of the tables, a big man in working dungarees said roughly, "That slob giving you any trouble, Scotty?"

I turned around to face the man fully. I took out my badge and walked over to the table. I showed it all around, and silence settled in the room. I asked quietly, "You didn't mean 'slob', did you?"

He shook his head and looked down at his beer.

I went back to the bar. "Scotty, I won't call you a liar. I'll just tell you that *Clyde Jarvis walked into my apartment less than ten seconds after you hung up.* I haven't told anybody that, yet. I thought you and I could do business without getting you into trouble. But you're a man who likes trouble, I now see. So I'll give this information to Homicide."

I finished my drink and turned from the bar and had taken two steps before Scotty said, "Just a minute, please, Sergeant."

Chapter Ten

Plenty of Suspects . . .

I CAME BACK TO THE BAR AND he asked quietly, "If that's true, what are you doing here now?"

"Trying to get the story of it. Jarvis wouldn't tell me, in my apartment, who I'd been talking to. I want to know

who his accomplices are, if any."

Scotty studied the top of the bar. Then he reached over to pour himself a jolt. He gulped it and looked at me. "Cops—" He shook his head.

"I'm not out to get you, Scotty," I said gently. "A quick C note isn't something you can afford to overlook."

"C note?" He shook his head. "Twenty bucks he promised me and gave me enough information to make sense. I don't want any trouble with the law. I've always been clean."

"You're still clean. Believe me, Homicide knifed me. The D.A. won't stand still for wire-tapping and I work for the D.A. There'll be some heads rolling over this fiasco, Scotty."

His eyes retained their skepticism.

"I know you don't want to get a buddy in trouble," I said quietly.

"He's no buddy of mine."

"No buddy? And you get involved in a murder rap for twenty bucks? Is business that bad?"

He didn't answer.

I said, "Let's have a drink on me, Scotty. To better understanding."

He poured a pair of drinks and we sipped.

Then he said, "Where's Jarvis now?"

"I don't know. He left my apartment when I said I couldn't promise him immunity right now."

"Then you didn't give him to Homicide?"

"After what they pulled on me?" I shook my head.

Scotty sipped a little more of his drink and looked over at the men at the tables. Then he looked back at me. "Jarvis is scared, all right, but I don't think it's the law so much. This big shamus, this Deutscher is the one that's got Clyde scared."

"He's big enough to scare anybody," I agreed. "But I thought he and Jarvis were working together?"

Scotty shrugged. "I guess Clyde did, too." He finished his drink.

"Have another on the City," I said.

"Thanks." He poured it. "I guess they were working together, all right. Until Deutscher decided he could work the same way alone."

"The same way?"

Scotty rolled the whisky in his mouth. "That's right. I mean working all the angles, like a politician. That Jarvis is sharp."

"He must be, to stay alive. I wonder if he knows who the killer is."

"He's got a favorite suspect, I think."

"Who, Scotty?"

The little man paused for only a moment. "Some blonde, some rich doll that lusted for this Adams. I forget her name."

"Was it Deering, Eve Deering?"

He nodded emphatically. "That's it."

I shook my head. "She's innocent. I had her under observation at the time Adams died."

Scotty wiped his mouth and rinsed out his glass. "Sure, she's innocent. The rich ones are always innocent."

I didn't argue. I finished my drink and paid him and told him, "I hope Clyde stays alive long enough to pay you your twenty." I put my card on the bar. "If anybody gives you any trouble, my phone number's on there. Keep smiling."

He wasn't smiling when I left.

I phoned Griffin's office and gave him a résumé of the Homicide double-cross. He said he'd look into it and backed my stand. I phoned the Malibu house and

the nurse told me Eve was awake.

"She'd like to talk to you, Sergeant."

"I'll be there in an hour."

I ate at a drive-in restaurant on the Coast Highway. The six-o'clock traffic was solid in all the lanes, the northbound mostly luxury cars, heading for home.

Lights winked at me from homes in the hills, the dying sun was red over a blue sea. We'd had our rain, this season; the hills were green.

It was dark by the time I got to the Malibu roost. The thin nurse's nasal voice informed me Eve was resting in the living room.

She was propped with pillows on the built-in davenport. She wore a blue flannel robe and no make-up. Her golden hair was drawn severely to a knot atop her head. She looked washed and weary.

"Hello, Sergeant Joe," she said meekly.

"Hello."

"Don't stare at me," she said. "Sit down somewhere. I'm frightened, Joe."

"Of what?" I started for a chair but she patted the couch.

"Sit here."

I came over to sit at her feet.

She said, "I'm frightened because of all the things that have happened. Wouldn't you be, if you weren't a policeman?"

"If the things that happened were close to me, I suppose I'd be frightened. All kinds of people die every day."

"By violence? Murdered?"

I nodded.

She took an audible breath. "You're different, this evening."

I said nothing.

Her eyes searched my face. "You're colder— You— I mean, *before* I had a feeling you were more or less on my side, if that makes sense—"

"What side is yours?"

"Well, perhaps I worded it badly. I meant that you seemed more friendly before."

"It's been another nasty day," I said. "I've been double-crossed and lied to. I've been threatened by a very muscular citizen."

She smiled. "Why don't you marry Adele and get into a more gentlemanly line of work?"

"Maybe I'm waiting for a better offer. Tell me about you, now."

"What's there to tell? I'm better, now. When I learned Jeremiah had died, I guess I went off my rocker. But we all die, don't we?"

She was under control. She had more self-discipline than I'd previously given her credit for. But I had a feeling this meeting was less dialogue than fencing match.

I said quietly, "Would you go back to your talk with Jarvis and give me all of what was said?"

"I already have."

"I see. And why did you tell me your dad had a weak heart?"

Her face stiffened. "Because he has."

"Who told you he did?"

She paused again. Then, softly, "He told me. Why?"

"Because the doctor told me it isn't true."

She bit her lip.

I asked, "Didn't you ever discuss it with the doctor?"

She shook her head. "Another of Dad's weapons—another sword to hold over my head! And I believed him."

I said, "It doesn't seem logical to me

that you wouldn't discuss it with the doctor."

Her chin lifted and she'd never looked more candid. "Doesn't it. Believe me, Joe, it's the truth."

I said nothing.

She asked, "Have they found this Jarvis person?"

"He phoned me."

Her face seemed to tighten. "What did he tell you?"

"He told me he's frightened of Deutscher. He thinks Deutscher has some influence in the Department and that's true enough. Jarvis thinks he might have something that would help to solve this case."

She took a breath. "Why didn't he tell it to you?"

"He's using it as a guarantee of fair treatment by us. He wants the guarantee before he comes out of hiding."

Eve looked down at her hands. "He probably will tell the police about my being gone from the hotel the morning Burns Murphy died."

"That won't be news to them."

She looked at me worriedly.

I said, "Maybe Jarvis saw the killer when he was over at the temple. Maybe he's got the true story of Deutscher's part in all this."

There was the sound of a refrigerator door closing in the kitchen. A few seconds later, the nurse came into the living room.

"Are you staying here tonight, Miss Deering?"

Eve nodded. "And I hope you'll stay, too."

"I'll be here," the nurse said, and went back to the kitchen.

I said, "I wonder if Jarvis used to listen in to your phone calls. He may have found out about Jeremiah Adams that way."

"He wasn't at the switchboard; he was at the desk."

"Yes, but he could take over the switchboard when the girl was gone. Did you phone from the hotel to tell your father that you weren't in Palm Springs?"

She nodded. "I did."

"Jarvis may have heard that," I pointed out, "and thus realized you were really Eve Deering. He could find a dollar in that."

"Jarvis," she said quietly, "must have learned I was Eve Deering when you first came to the desk that night and asked for me. You're trying to bury something in words, Joe."

"I'm trying to get at the truth," I said. "At times, I have to go after it indirectly."

"With me, too?"

"With you especially. You've lied before."

Her face was frozen. "I understand. And was that a part of your job, what happened here a few nights ago?"

I flushed. "If you're talking about what happened in the den, that wasn't a part of my job. And looking back on it, I don't even think it was my idea. Though I was a willing accomplice, I'll admit."

"I think," she said, "you had better go." Her face was white.

I stood up. "I didn't mean to disturb you, sick as you are."

Her eyes blazed at me. "You're a slick one, aren't you? You haven't the ethics of a jungle cat."

I said stiffly, "Police officers deal with some strange people. I think, even so, I've maintained a few ethics."

"They aren't apparent," she said. "Good night, Sergeant."

"Good night, Miss Deering," I said. "We'll see each other again, I'm sure."

Some of the low, ground-clinging fog was again coming up the canyon from the ocean. I drove slowly through it all the way to Santa Monica, when it got clearer.

As I turned into the driveway that led to the apartment garage, I saw the Buick Roadmaster at the curb. The car's lights flashed on and off, as though signaling, as I continued back toward the garage.

I put the car away and came back to where Deutscher still sat behind the wheel of the Buick. The door on the curb side swung open as I approached. I climbed in and closed the door.

"Where's Jarvis?" That was his greeting.

"Hiding from you, Ned, I guess. Are you gunning for him?"

Deutscher's voice was ragged. "What the hell kind of talk is that?"

"He's afraid of you. The other night I asked you where he was and now you're asking me. You know as much about it as I do."

"He phoned you, didn't he?"

"Who told you he did? I didn't think that was known outside of the Department."

"Maybe I'm not as far outside of the Department as you'd like to put me, Parrish. How come you're so buddy-buddy with Jarvis all of a sudden?"

"Maybe he figures he can trust *me*. Why are you worried about him, Ned?"

"Because I'm interested in cleaning up a murder, the murder of Burns Murphy. And Adams's death is tied in with that. And I've a hunch Jarvis might know something about who killed Adams."

"If he does," I said, "that's the Department's business, not yours. And I don't have to remind you, Deutscher, that the Department takes a very dim view of private dicks who stick their noses into homicide cases. Take my advice and get out while you've still got your license."

A pause, and then, "Tough tonight, aren't you?"

"I'm getting sick of seeing you, Ned," I told him. "I figured you might be cooperative but I realize now you're playing the same shady game you always play. I don't want to be a party to it."

I left him with that. I got out and slammed the car door. The tires of the big car shrieked as he gunned away from the curb.

I had a can of lemon juice left and I made another pitcher of lemonade in the hope that I could flush away the nagging remnants of my cold.

I was getting ready to soak in a hot tub when the phone rang. It was Griffin. "There'll be another meeting in the Mayor's office tomorrow. Same cast, same time."

"About this fiasco today?"

"That's right. We'll either get some respect from the various parties or the fur will fly. How's that cold?"

"I think I can whip it tonight. I'll be there at ten o'clock."

IT WAS THE SAME CAST AS BEfore, with one addition. The new player was Captain MacDarrel, the Homicide Chief who had refused to give me the address of Jarvis's supposed call. Neither he nor Kafke looked my way as I entered.

The Mayor smiled at all of us in his lodge-meeting way and said, "Sam, I think you were the first to complain about lack of co-operation. We'll have your story first."

Griffin nodded at me. "Sergeant Parrish can do a better job on that."

I related it from my call to Kafke's partner, through my call from the alleged Jarvis, through my call back to Homicide, and finished with my second talk with Kafke's partner.

The Mayor nodded solemnly and then looked at Kafke.

Kafke said, "Most of what the Sergeant says is true, but Homicide doesn't believe in making deals with fugitives from a murder charge. So we tapped the Sergeant's phone and had the call traced while he was talking to Jarvis."

The Mayor looked back at me.

I said, "I didn't know Jarvis was charged with murder, and I'm sure if he was, it wouldn't stick. And I didn't think the Department went in for wiretapping."

The Mayor flushed. "I'll take some responsibility for that. I'll admit your Chief of Police doesn't feel as I do about it."

In his chair, the Chief said nothing, looking infinitely weary.

Kafke said, "If Sergeant Parrish has a better murder suspect, I'd like to hear the name." He didn't look at me.

"I've got five suspects better than that," I said. "I notice Ned Deutscher hasn't been brought in for questioning."

Kafke looked sullen. Both MacDarrel and the Mayor looked uncomfortable. Finally, the Mayor said, "Why do you think this Deutscher should be brought in for questioning?"

"Because he was in close association with Jarvis before Jarvis disappeared. Because he was investigating the Burns Murphy case. Because he mysteriously appeared at the temple on San Vicente only a little while after Adams died. I think, if Deutscher could be kept out of circulation by the Department for a while, Jarvis might come out of hiding."

Kafke spoke first. "That last suggestion doesn't make sense to me."

MacDarrel looked at the Chief. MacDarrel would have an opinion as soon as he saw how the Chief felt about this.

The Chief said, "Deutscher could be brought in for questioning and we could decide the rest after talking to him."

"Exactly what I thought," MacDarrel said.

Kafke nodded, looking at nobody. "I'll call him in."

That was the end of the meeting for the lower echelons. The rest of us were dismissed while Griffin and the Mayor and the Chief had a short, three-man confab of their own.

While I was there, I checked some other names through R and I but got nothing. I went over to *Lippy's* for lunch.

"Did you see Deke?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "Why?"

"He's been phoning. Wants you to call him right back at his apartment."

I phoned him, and he said, "I hope we've got a clean wire."

"I'm sure we have. Did you hear from the man who phoned before? Is that it?"

"That's it. Come on over."

"Can't you tell me what he said over the phone?"

"He'd rather tell you himself," Deke said. "He's here."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Deal With a Mustache

AT DEKE'S APARTMENT, THE door was locked and I rang. He opened the door and told me, "He's in the bedroom."

The dapper man with the mustache didn't look quite as dapper as he had at our first meeting. He sat in a red leather chair in the big bedroom, drinking a can of beer.

He looked at me doubtfully as I entered and asked, "Did you come alone?"

"I came alone. You were a damn fool to run away, Jarvis."

"I'm not sure about that. The way this Deutscher can manipulate the Police Department, I figured the safest way was out of the Department's reach."

I sat on the edge of Deke's king-sized bed. "What makes you so scared of Ned Deutscher all of a sudden?"

"I was supposed to meet him there, at Adams's temple. I get there and find the man dead and Deutscher nowhere in sight. And I remembered that Adams had almost been framed the same way for this Burns Murphy's murder. It didn't seem like a smart place to hang around."

"I see. And then that woman saw you and you decided to go into hiding."

"Wouldn't you?"

"I don't know. Did you see who killed Adams?"

He shook his head. "Unless it was that woman, that witness. She's the only one I saw around there."

"What business did you and Deutscher have with Adams?"

"Money business, Deutscher claimed. He wanted Adams to hire him. Secretly, of course."

"Hire him—? For what?"

Clyde Jarvis smiled. "To establish Adams's innocence, of course. Adams needed a friend with Department influence to clear him of the suspicion of Murphy's death."

"Maybe," I said slowly, "Deutscher wanted to sell Adams something else. Maybe it would be blackmail, huh?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I only know what Deutscher told me."

"Who else would Deutscher be working for?"

"Well, once he mentioned some relative of Burns Murphy's, but I think that was a lie, just to give him an excuse to nose into the case."

"And who were you working for, besides yourself?"

"Nobody."

"The only reason, then, that you're scared of Deutscher is because you were supposed to meet him at the cult and when you got there, Adams was dead?"

"That's the big reason. He just scares me generally, a double-crosser like that."

"Why did you line up with him? What did you have to offer him?"

Jarvis looked at his hands. "I knew Eve Deering was registered at the hotel under a false name. I knew she was tied up with this Adams and learned she had been investigated by Burns Murphy. When Deutscher came around to check on her, I told him we could work pretty well together."

"You're being remarkably honest," I said doubtfully. "Usually, admissions like you're making means the man is trying to cover up something worse."

He said nothing.

I asked, "Didn't you try and sell your

information to anybody else?"

"Just one tiny bit of it," he said, and told me about that.

I picked up the phone from the bedside stand and called Homicide. When I got Captain MacDarrel on the wire, I said, "Has Deutscher been picked up yet?"

"Not yet, Sergeant. Don't crowd us."

"I didn't mean to, sir. I've just learned that Deutscher had an appointment to see Adams the night he died. When I questioned Deutscher on the scene that night, he told me the only reason he was at the temple was because he'd picked up the police call on his car radio."

"Where did you hear this, Sergeant?"

"From one of my—sources, sir."

"Well, keep him available. Or her."

"I'll do that, sir."

"And keep in touch with us."

Clyde Jarvis sat quietly in the red leather chair, his eyes on me.

I said, "You've done some lying over the last couple of days. How would you like to lie *for* the Department, for a change?"

"What's the angle?"

"It would only be a temporary lie," I said. "You claim that you saw the killer at Adams's temple. You won't have to come out of hiding for that. I can say you phoned me or sent me a letter or maybe I can think of something even better."

"A *temporary* lie?" he asked.

"That's right. Until the killer is nailed."

Jarvis took a deep breath. "I suppose, as a citizen, it's really my duty, isn't it?"

That rationalization I couldn't permit him. He hadn't earned it. I said, "No, it isn't your duty as a citizen. But it would be smart politics for a man who's in water as hot as you are."

He took another breath. "You don't want to leave me *anything*, do you?"

"Just your neck," I said.

"You're the boss," he said.

I went into the other room and asked Deke, "Could you keep Clyde here for a while? Is there any place in this apartment where he'd be safe from a search?"

"What the hell is this? You're talking like Dick Tracy."

"Have you a place to hide him?"

"Sure, I have. But I've got a big game coming up tonight, and I sure as hell don't want this place a target for the law. Joe, I'm not on the police force. I don't want to have anything to do with them."

"You won't. I'll have him out of here before any game of yours starts."

"And I won't get in trouble with the law?"

"For helping an officer? Don't be silly. What's to eat in the joint?"

There was a ham he'd bought for tonight and plenty of eggs, and the three of us made a meal of that with some rye bread.

We were having coffee when the phone rang. Deke answered and handed it over to me.

It was Adele. "I've missed you. I'm having a party at the place in Palm Springs this week-end. Wouldn't you and Deke like to come? Deke can bring a friend, if he wants."

"I don't know. I'll know later, tonight. If this case is cleaned up, I'll be able to come, and want to. I'll let you know."

Deke stirred his coffee and smiled.

I said, "Palm Springs this week-end, and you can bring a friend if you want. Don't smirk."

"I'm not. More coffee?"

I had another cup. Then I went into the bedroom to use the phone in there. I phoned Malibu, and the nurse answered.

"Could I speak to Miss Deering, please?"

"I'm sorry, Sergeant. Miss Deering is resting under a sedative."

"How is her condition?"

"Disturbed. You would have to ask Doctor Delavarum for the authentic diagnosis."

Whatever that meant. I thanked her and hung up. I phoned the Deering home and Sarah Jean Ramsay answered.

I said, "This is Sergeant Parrish, Sarah Jean. What time did Miss Eve leave the house to go to Malibu?"

"I'm not sure, Sergeant. But it was quite some time before you came here that day. At least two hours."

"I see. And how is Mr. Deering?"

"He's better. He's watching one of his favorite programs on television, though, and I hate to disturb him."

"Would it be possible for me to talk to you alone, somewhere?"

A silence, and then, "Why—?"

"I need some information you have."

A longer silence. "Is it about Miss Eve, Sergeant?"

"Partly. I'd prefer to ask Miss Eve but she isn't very friendly at the moment and, besides, she's under a sedative. You know, don't you, that I wouldn't want information that would harm the innocent?"

"It doesn't matter if she's innocent or not, Sergeant. I wouldn't give you any information that would harm Miss Eve."

"You don't want to talk to me, then?"

"I didn't say that. I'm off from four to seven. I could meet you somewhere."

We arranged to meet at a corner a few blocks from the Deering house. I would take her to see her folks in Santa Monica, thus saving her a bus ride. We could talk on the trip.

I helped Deke with the dishes and there was still an hour to kill, so I went over to *Lippy's*.

He told me, "Deutscher was in, looking for you. He seemed worried."

"That'll teach him to tangle with me."

"It must be your fists he's afraid of," Lippy said. "It sure as hell can't be your influence in the Department. He's got more."

I poured us both a drink. "Things have changed since you left the Department, Lippy. We're cleaning out the trash."

He looked at me doubtfully a moment and then lifted his drink. "To better times."

We drank to that.

I asked, "Did Deutscher mention what he wanted to talk to me about?"

Lippy shook his head.

I said, "He's going to be picked up and questioned."

"Questioned? Deutscher—? You're kidding, Joe."

"That's the gospel. Right from the Chief."

Lippy shook his head again. "To think I would live to see this day." He looked past me moodily. "You know, if I had your luck and looks with my brain, I'd probably be Chief of Police in this town, right now."

"You might at that, Lippy," I agreed gravely. "Or even Mayor."

Driving out to the corner where I was going to pick up Sarah Jean, I searched my mind for all the ammunition I could bring to bear on the target for tonight. The big lie had been a double lie and would involve Sarah's idol. Deceit would have to be a continuing weapon.

Sarah Jean was waiting on the corner when I got there. She wore a black jersey dress of quiet elegance and a black, brocaded, fingertip-length coat. She wore gloves and a hat, like a lady should, even in our climate.

I unlatched the door on the curb side and she stepped in.

"Cigarette?" I asked her, and handed over the package.

"Thank you, Sergeant." She took one and lighted it and handed the package back.

"I wonder," I said, "if you know why I wanted to talk to you?"

"I think I can guess, Sergeant. It probably has something to do with the time of absences from the house."

"That's right."

She lowered the window on her side of the car. "A Mr. Deutscher phoned after you did. He was looking for you. Do you know him?"

"I know him. Do you?"

She nodded. "He's been to the house."

Bit by bit, it added up. I should have come to Sarah Jean earlier. On Veteran, I cut over toward Wilshire.

She said, "I've been thinking back and then I checked the newspapers and what you're thinking is possible. And then I tried to think of where my loyalty lay. It's not an easy decision."

"Did you know Burns Murphy?"

"He's been to the house often. He was a fine man."

"That's right. And now he's dead. Your loyalty should be with the law, Miss Ramsay."

"I suppose. Though it's a white man's law."

"That will change. It takes time but you know it's changing every day."

"Pollyanna thinking," she said. "You can turn on 14th Street. I live south of Pico." A pause, and then, "*Naturally.*"

Naturally. South of Pico in Santa Monica, where the disenfranchised live, Mexicans and Negroes and the others who get attention only at tax and campaign time. The sad, stripped citizens who live on promises. And on labor the more fortunately born won't perform.

It was the neatest house in the block, but it wasn't a neat block. By the time I'd opened the door to let her out, Sarah had told me all she knew. It wasn't too much, but it helped.

I asked, "Do you want me to pick you up at seven o'clock?"

She shook her head. "I don't think I'll go back tonight. I think I'm going to be sick. Good afternoon, Sergeant."

"Good afternoon, Miss Ramsay," I said. "And thank you, very much."

Chapter Twelve

Like a Lamb

BACK AT THE APARTMENT, DEKE and Jarvis were playing gin rummy in the bedroom. Deke said, "I hope you need him. He's into me for twenty already."

"I need him," I said. "I want him to make a phone call right now, and arrange an appointment."

Jarvis looked up worriedly. "Some-

thing cute? What are your plans for me, Sergeant?"

"Don't worry," I told him. "You'll come out of it all right if you listen to instructions and play it just the way I tell it to you."

His face was grave. "I won't come out of it as well as you do, I'll bet."

"I'm not in trouble," I told him. "Are you going to co-operate, or do you want to take off now?"

"Let's have it," he said finally.

I gave it all to him, including my suspicions and what I proposed for him.

When I'd finished, he said, "That's dangerous as hell. That scares me, Sergeant."

"You'll be watched. Clyde, some day you may need me and I'm not going to forget tonight, if you go through with it."

He stared at me sullenly. "That's real nice of you."

"You're a wanted man," I pointed out. "I could lose my job, hiding you out like this. And I think you know you're in serious trouble at the moment. If you help to trap the killer, you'll look mighty good to the Department."

A long pause, and then he said, "All right." He stood up and went to the phone. "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell him you'll meet him at that vacant lot about two blocks from his house. Tell him you saw him at the temple but you don't intend to buck a man as big as he is. All you want is five thousand dollars so that you can get out of town. And you intend to stay out of town. You want him at the lot with the money at nine o'clock sharp."

Jarvis nodded, and picked up the phone.

THERE WAS A THREE-QUARTER moon and the stars were bright. On Sunset, most of the traffic seemed to be heading west, toward the ocean.

Jarvis said, "I sure wound up on the bottom in this scrimmage. How come you're playing this alone? You must need the publicity."

"I'm not playing it alone," I pointed out. "I've got you."

"And *where* you've got me."

"No. I phoned for help. Don't worry, Clyde. Nothing's going to happen to you. That's more than you could be sure of eight hours ago."

"For your information, Sergeant, that's more than I can be sure of now, too."

I asked gently, "Do you want to back out?"

"And what happens then?"

"That would be up to Sergeant Kafke."

Jarvis sighed. "Keep driving."

As I pulled into the driveway, I told him, "Stay low in the car. I'll drive you over to the lot later. Now, don't be nervous."

He didn't answer.

There was a light over the doorway, but no light visible in the front of the house. J.D. was probably in his study, watching TV.

We'd had to clear this with the Beverly Hills Police Department and I could only hope that nothing had leaked out from there. There wasn't any reason they should leak it, but even a little one could be disaster.

J.D. came to the door. He looked at me for a moment before saying, "Good evening, Sergeant. I wish you'd phoned, first."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Deering. Were you

going out?"

"I rarely go out. I was intending to go to bed early. That nigger maid of ours is sick and she decided to stay home tonight." He nodded me in.

I followed him to the same little room and he sat in the same chair, facing the television screen. I remembered Deke telling me to look for a killer with a stack of old pulp magazines. And I suddenly realized this *was* a stack of old pulp magazines, a new format for the old medium, a stack of old pulps in blonde or provincial, mahogany or limed oak.

"Well—?" Deering said impatiently.

I sat where I would be in his line of vision. "I'm just checking on some—some inaccuracies, Mr. Deering."

He looked at me frigidly. "Mine?"

"Yours, among others. You told me, one evening, that Eve had phoned you from that Santa Monica hotel in the afternoon, telling you that she hadn't gone to Palm Springs."

"She did phone me from the hotel telling me she was in Santa Monica. She'd previously told me she was going to Palm Springs."

"But she didn't phone you in the afternoon. She phoned you later in the evening. She phoned you *after* you'd already told me that she'd phoned."

His glare burned my face. "I don't follow you, Sergeant."

"I wondered why you lied," I said.

"I probably didn't. But if I did, would you have a reason for it?"

"I might. Because that should prove someone else told you Eve wasn't in Palm Springs. And you wondered why Burns Murphy hadn't told you that, if he was watching her. He was still working for you up to the time of his death, wasn't he?"

"You'd have to check his records for that. I—" He stopped and wiped his forehead. "Go on, Sergeant. It's more than this—this so-called lie you're worrying about."

"Burns was half sold on the cult," I went on. "And I think he was in love with your daughter. You couldn't stand that, could you? You don't want anyone to love her nor her to love anyone else. It's jealousy, I suppose. You're a sick man, Mr. Deering. And when you learned that Murphy's reports were inaccurate, it was too much. You probably learned that from this—Jarlow or whatever his name is. He phoned you from the hotel."

His eyes bored at me. "Jarvis, Clyde Jarvis, the clerk?"

"That's the name. Homicide's looking for him right now. Anyway, this angered you and you went over to see Burns Murphy in his office. And then you saw a way to get both Burns and the man you hated as much—the man Eve seemed so interested in. So you pretended to Burns that you wanted to buy off Jeremiah Adams."

"That's a guess, and it's ridiculous."

"Maybe. You had Burns phone him, so you knew your name wasn't mentioned. You killed Burns and hoped that Adams would be caught there. You phoned the police, anonymously, hoping that they'd catch Adams there."

"Sergeant, that's about enough. You'll hear about this. I hope you have another line of work, because you're going to need it."

"This Jarvis person," I continued, "knew where your daughter's place in Malibu is. And so did Ned Deutscher. You told them."

"There's nothing secret about that place."

"Secret enough. An unlisted phone, no name at the side of the road. Deutscher worked for you, too, didn't he? Deutscher tried to work for everybody in this mess."

"You would have to ask Mr. Deutscher. Sergeant, I haven't been out of this house more than three times in the last two weeks."

"You'd only have to leave twice," I said quietly. "And you were gone at the times both murders were committed."

He stared at me for seconds. "That nigger, eh? That's why she claims to be sick. She hasn't got the nerve to face me and lie so she builds up this cock-and-bull story to sell you. I knew that black wench hated me and now—"

I raised a hand. "Why don't you come down to the station, Mr. Deering, and make out your statement? I'm afraid we have a case. And once we locate this clerk, the case against you will be complete. He's never said so, but I wouldn't be surprised if he saw you that night over at Adams's church."

"If he says he saw me, he's a liar." Saliva flecked Deering's lips.

"He hasn't said it. But we'll locate him, eventually, and when we do, we have ways of getting at the truth. Unless he leaves the country, his apprehension is merely a matter of hours. And he hasn't got the money to get out of the country."

Deering's eyes went to the electric clock atop the TV set. It was now five minutes to nine.

His voice tried to be threatening but there was a whine in it. "I'll make out a statement tomorrow, in Griffin's office. I'll have my attorneys with me. And you'll be out of a job ten minutes later, Sergeant. Sam Griffin won't stand for the persecution of an innocent man just because some dumb Irish cop needs publicity."

I went to the door. "All right. I won't bring you in tonight, then. But you'd better put off that Texas trip you'd planned for a while. It can't be too long before they find this Jarvis, Mr. Deering."

"Get out," he whispered. "Get out, right now."

I went out and into the night air. I climbed into the flivver and drove down the drive to Sunset. It wasn't until then that Jarvis rose up from his position in the back seat.

"So—?" he asked.

"He admits nothing."

"So you stake me out."

"It could bring the gun out," I explained. "He's amateur enough to use the same gun on two killings but he also might be clever enough to have it well hid now."

"Gun—?" Jarvis's voice was hoarse. "That's what you wanted me for, to flush the gun? What the hell kind of—"

"He wouldn't kill you on a lot two blocks from his house, Jarvis. Not after he knows I suspect him. His job is to get rid of you. And if you—die, to get rid of the body. He'll try to get you into the car, if he means to use the gun."

"Maybe. That's just a guess. If he doesn't bring a car, you'll be looking for me again, Sergeant."

"You have my permission to run if he doesn't bring a car. But if he does, you try and get him over to the lot, first, and I'll try and get into the back of his car. There'll be plenty of cops hidden all over that lot. At the first sign of a gun in Deering's hand, you'll see all the law you want to see."

"Sergeant, I hope you're leveling with me."

"You have my word."

"And who can shoot straight in the dark?"

"The boys who are there can. There's a big realtor's sign on the lot and some mighty high grass. There'll be at least one officer breathing down your neck all the time you're talking to Deering."

At the lot, I dropped Jarvis off and then went on to park the car around the bend, out of sight. Kafke came along through the high grass and over to my car.

"Come on, Joe. We'd better get hidden. I—we—I mean, I apreciate this, Joe. I hope you're right. If you are, it's your story."

I said nothing. I patted his arm patronizingly and we went back to where the big realty sign offered this acre and a half for sale—reasonably. The lot probably wasn't worth much more than sixty thousand dollars.

Only Clyde Jarvis was visible above the high grass, standing about a third of the way into the field, just outside the glow from the street lamp on Sunset.

We crouched near by, and Kafke asked, "Isn't five thousand kind of cheap blackmail, Joe?"

"I wanted a sum he'd have immediately available. Sarah Jean told me he keeps around five to ten thousand in cash in the house all the time."

Then Kafke said, "Man, we played

that close. There's a car slowing down, now. It's a Lincoln, isn't it?"

It was. A black Lincoln. I said, "No reporters here, I hope."

"Not yet," Kafke said. "But they've been alerted. The Department can use the ink."

The door on the curb side opened, and a stocky man in a dark topcoat slid out from the other side of the seat. He had a package in his hand, a small package. Jarvis had asked for twenties and tens and I'd thought they would make a bigger package than the one in Deering's hand.

There was no way for me to get to Deering's car without being seen. I watched him closely, wondering about the package.

Now he saw Jarvis and Jarvis waved to him. Now he was moving through the grass toward our lamb, and there was still only the package in one hand and nothing in the other. The moon was clear enough to make me sure of that.

Jarvis called, "Did you bring the money?"

And Deering answered, "And more. Almost seven thousand here, every dime I had in the house. But I can get more. How about you?"

"What about me?"

"The police are after you. You'll have to get out of the country."

"Not me. They've got nothing on me."

"They'll railroad you. Come on over to the car."

"Just toss the money over," Jarvis said. "All I want is the money."

"Be reasonable, man. My life's at stake. I can't have you in a position where you can be apprehended. I've got contacts, and plenty of money. I can set you up for life where no policeman will ever be able to touch you."

Below the ground, I thought.

"Toss over the money," Jarvis said sharply, "and then get the hell out of here. Come on, now, hurry up."

Silence, and then Deering said, "I must insist on your safety. If you are too stupid to appreciate my position, I'll have to force you to come with me and listen to reason."

Kafke whispered, "Can you see anything?"

"Nothing. He must be pulling a gun. How about those men behind the sign?"

Then Jarvis said loudly, "Put that gun away. I'll come."

That's when Kafke and I got up to show our own guns.

CAPTAIN MacDARREL SAID, "I'M glad to see you and Sergeant Kafke working together on this."

Kafke was still in with Deering. I sat in Captain MacDarrel's office, waiting for the Chief and Griffin to come down.

It would make for good press relations, MacDarrel had thought, if we had a picture of all of us for the papers, showing the efficient co-operation existing in all the City's departments. The Mayor couldn't make it; he was on a little vacation trip to Las Vegas.

I said, "Think we can lose Deutscher's license for him? If you have information he was working for one of Murphy's relatives and we know now he also worked for Deering and tried to get Adams, isn't that serving diverse and opposing interests in the same case?"

MacDarrel opened his mouth and closed it. He opened it again and said, "It's a prospect to consider. He hasn't

exactly played fair with us, has he?"

"Not exactly," I said bitterly.

The Captain nodded, looking thoughtful. Then he changed the subject. "This J.D. must be—well, 'pathological' would be the cleanest word—about his daughter, I mean?"

"Among other things," I said. "Is she here, now?"

"She's with the matron. She must have known the old man was the killer, don't you think? She practically made a red herring of herself."

"I've no idea," I said.

He smiled meaningly. "Haven't you? Beautiful girl, isn't she?"

I looked at him coldly. "She is beautiful. Yes, really beautiful. But that doesn't cut any ice with the law, does it, Captain?"

"None," he replied. "As we all know."

The door opened and Led Judson from ballistics came in. He waved at me and told the Captain, "Same gun, sir. I wish all our killers were amateurs."

Too many are, I thought.

Led still stood there when Kafke came in.

"He's broken," Kafke said wearily. "Knocked off Murphy because Murphy was making time with his daughter, or so he thought. Adams because Eve was falling for *him*—or maybe because Adams wasn't a born Californian; he wasn't quite clear on that. His attorneys are here; wouldn't be surprised if it'll be an insanity plea."

"Insanity!" The Captain shook his head. "Won't Griffin's courtroom boys chew that one up!" He looked at me. "Would you call him insane, Sergeant?"

"No more than the rest of us, sir," I told him.

I closed my eyes. I started thinking about the big week-end that was coming up in Palm Springs.

THE END

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A BEN HELM STORY

By Bruno Fischer

the Quiet Woman

It looked pretty cut and dried. She admitted killing her first husband with a milk bottle. Now her second had been murdered in the same way . . . .

IT TOOK ME A WEEK DURING A murderous heat spell in Buffalo to nail the blackmailer. She turned out to be a little old woman who could have been a symbol for Mother's Day. She wept when I phoned the police, but by the time they arrived she was cursing me like a fishwife. I stopped being quite as sorry for her.

It was close to midnight before I was through, but I didn't hanker to spend another night in Buffalo. I was anxious to get back to West Amber where my wife was the star of the summer stock theater. I told my client I'd send him the bill, and I got in my car and was off.

At ten-thirty in the morning I reached the snug green-and-white bungalow we had rented for the summer. Greta wasn't in. I was disappointed; a week hadn't been forever, but it wasn't a short time either when you were married to a woman like Greta.

A couple of hundred feet down the narrow blacktop country road, Lorna Elliott, the wife of one of the actors, was puttering in her garden. I strolled over to her.

"Oh, hello, Ben," she said, rising from a flower bed and dusting the flaring skirt of her pink gingham dress. "When did you get back?"

We didn't know each other very well, but everybody connected with the West Amber Summer Theater—even if only by marriage like me and Lorna—formed a tight little group in the community.

"A few minutes ago," I said. "Know if there's a rehearsal this early?"

"They started at ten and expect to be at it all day. Doug picked Greta up in his car."

"Isn't there a new play scheduled for tonight?"

"Yes. And it hasn't been going right at the rehearsals."

"Does it ever?" I said.

Lorna Elliot smiled. She was a trim, small woman with a quiet, wistful face. Her smile was quiet, too, hardly more than a flickering of the lips, and that was about the most I'd ever seen her give of herself. She was about as different as could be from her chattering, swell-headed actor husband. Except that they were both good-looking people.

"It is a hectic life," she murmured and looked down at the garden claw in her hand. "Sometimes I wish Doug had —well, another profession."

I told her I was in a position to appreciate how she felt and went back to my bungalow.

There was no point to dropping in at the theater, even if I hadn't been dead-tired from driving half the night and part of the morning. Abbott Fowler, the director, didn't care to have husbands or any other outsiders hanging around during rehearsals, especially not during the unrestrained madness of the day of an opening night. You'd think that a company putting on a different play every week would take each one in stride, but it didn't happen that way.

In the bedroom, I got my shoes and shirt off and then stopped bothering and flopped down on the bed. I didn't know another thing until late in the afternoon when Greta's voice woke me.

She had seen our car and was calling to me while still outside.

I jumped off the bed and went out to meet her. When I reached the porch, she was running up the steps. At the head of the short dirt driveway Doug

Elliott was getting out of his red convertible.

Greta wore blue jeans rolled to just below her knees and a white T-shirt. That was a young girl's outfit and although she was very much a mature woman she looked wonderful in it. She had the figure and the knack for looking wonderful in anything.

She cried, "Darling!" and we grabbed each other.

But the greeting was by no means all it should have been. We had an audience. Doug Elliott, after having dropped her off, wasn't in a hurry to get to his own place down the road. He stood in the driveway, watching us as if curious to see how somebody else kissed Greta—in this case, her husband. He had wavy blond hair coming to a widow's peak, and he had a face and build that brought females of all ages flocking to the summer theater to see him make love to whoever the script called for, generally Greta.

I wanted to say, "Go on home," but I was brought up to be polite, so I merely said past Greta's black hair, "Hello, Doug."

"Hi, Ben. Can I have a word with you in private?"

"Now?"

Doug Elliott leered amiably. "I see your point, but it will be only for a minute."

Greta eased out of my embrace. "Anyway, I'm dying for a shower," she said and moved tall and graceful into the cottage.

I went down two of the porch steps. My chest and feet were bare. I sat down on the third step and said, "Go ahead."

He came close, standing over me. "Of course this is small potatoes for Ben Helm, the demon private detective. I've no gang of desperate criminals to be brought to book, but it's a job of work I'm willing to pay for."

I'd never cared much for him. He was too sleek and patronizing, and he was giving me a sample of it now. I plucked a blade of grass growing at the foot of the steps and nibbled on it.

"Aren't you interested?" he said after a pause.

"You haven't told me anything to make me interested."

"All I want is a simple investigation."

"Of who?"

"My wife," he said, glancing down the road toward his house and showing me his theatrical profile.

"Divorce?"

"Divorce or annulment, whichever turns out to be more convenient."

That sweet, quiet, shy woman, I thought. But you could never tell.

I dropped the blade of grass and stood up. "Sorry, but this isn't in my line."

"You're a detective, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. But I leave this kind of business to the agencies."

"What's the matter, too good for it?"

"Let's keep it polite and say I don't care for it."

Doug Elliott tapped a cigarette on the back of his wrist, a gesture strictly for the footlights. Then he stuck it in his mouth and said as he dipped his head to a match, "It's not quite what you think."

"You said divorce."

"I don't mean I want you to go around looking in beds. I want you to—"

"Don't tell me," I cut in. "I don't want any part of anything connected with divorce proceedings."

"If that's too dirty for you, how'd

you like a nice clean murder?"

"That supposed to be sarcasm?"

Doug Elliott looked at me with brows creased and the cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Then he said, "The hell with it," and strode to his convertible.

He drove on to the wife he didn't want. I went into the cottage, to my wife. . . .

2

THERE WAS NO NONSENSE ABOUT THE WEST Amber Theater. The structure was no renovated barn; where the actors emoted no cow had ever mooed, no horse had neighed. It had been built to be what it was, a summer repertory theater, the architecture rustic but the seats comfortable—out in the woods a couple of miles from town where there was plenty of fresh air and parking space.

That week's play was a bit of fluff called *My Bride Awaits*. It was supposed to be a comedy, and what laughs there were hinged on various efforts of the men and women characters trying to get into bed with each other. There was a lot of laughter, the kind you hear over off-color jokes. The only thing that interested me about it was that Greta had the lead.

The place was jammed that opening night. I hadn't been able to get a seat at the last moment, so I stood in back.

Toward the end of the first act, Greta and Doug Elliott had the stage to themselves. They were on a sofa, a natural enough place for much of the action of that kind of play. He was making an elaborate pass at her and she was playing hard to get, though obviously not quite meaning it.

"Aren't you jealous, Mr. Helm?" somebody beside me whispered.

In the dimness I saw Alice Brick standing next to me.

She was a strapping, bosomy, handsome girl of eighteen. Her father was the caretaker and handyman; he swept the floor and took care of the grounds around the theater and built the sets, under the direction of the scenic designer. Alice kept house for him in a tiny cottage in the woods a few hundred feet from the theater, but her heart belonged to the stage. Greta had told me that during rehearsals Alice would sit quietly in a back seat and watch with stars in her eyes. What young girl could resist the stage, especially when it was right on her doorstep?

"Aren't you, Mr. Helm?" she repeated.

"Jealous?" I shrugged. "It's just playacting."

"I know, but—" She broke off to watch Elliott wrestle with Greta on the sofa. "She's very beautiful."

"Uh-huh."

"And you're not really jealous?"

"Not as long as it's make-believe."

On the stage, Elliott was interrupted by a maid entering with drinks on a tray. Greta took the opportunity to get off the sofa.

"I could've had the maid's part," Alice Brick whispered. "It's only a walk-on, but it was my big chance to get in a real professional play. I asked Mr. Fowler and he said I could have the part, but Papa hit the ceiling. He said he wouldn't have his daughter be an actress. Don't you think he's being narrow-minded?"

"He has a point. It's a rough racket."

A woman turned her head in the last row and said, "Shh," and we shut up.

A few minutes later the first act curtain came down and I went out to smoke a pipeful. In the well-kept garden Lorna Elliott came up to me. She looked very trim in a flowered dress.

"Ben, would you mind driving me home?" she asked.

"I don't blame you. I find it pretty dull myself,"

"That's not it. I have a headache and I have to leave the car for Doug. You'll be back before the curtain goes up."

"Glad to," I said.

Lorna said even less than usual during the short ride. In fact, she said nothing at all, sitting huddled in the corner of the seat and staring out of the side window. I didn't think she had a headache. Probably she had found out that her husband wanted to get rid of her. She must have been sitting watching the man she loved and who no longer loved her, and she hadn't been able to take any more.

If it had been any of my business, I would have told her that she was too good for him. But it wasn't my business. I'd made sure it wasn't mine when I turned down his offer of the job to investigate her.

So our only conversation consisted of good-nights when I dropped her off. Then I turned around and drove back to the theater.

3

AT AROUND TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING I heard tapping on the door.

Beside me Greta slept soundly. The long nap I'd had during the day was keeping me from doing the same. But I was working at it, and somewhere between waking and dreaming there was that sound. Suddenly I was alert and tense, listening.

It was at the front door, all right, but sounded more like something soft thumping against the panel than a forthright rapping of knuckles. Maybe a stray dog.

The knocking went on, incessantly, with a kind of low-key monotonous rhythm. I slipped out of bed and fumbled into my robe and padded to the front door.

"Who's there?"

The voice out on the porch was human enough, if curiously hoarse. "Lorna Elliott," it said, like a toneless moan.

I turned on the porch light and opened the door. She had backed away, standing now near the steps and staring at me in the sudden glare of the overhead bulb. She wore a cotton robe and her feet were bare.

She stared at me. Her lips moved, but no sound came past them.

"What is it, Lorna?" I said.

She pushed strands of hair from her cheek. Apparently she wore little or nothing under that pale-blue wrap-around robe, and the night had turned chilly. Her dazed eyes never left my face.

I put my hands on her shoulders and started to shake her to snap her out of whatever state of shock she was in. She drew back at my touch and found part of her voice.

"The bottle," she intoned, her eyes wide.

"What bottle?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

She hugged the robe about her body—

not so much for warmth or modesty, I thought, as to hold onto herself. That seemed to help her gain control, for when she spoke her voice was steady enough.

"Come with me," she said. "Please!"

"To your house?"

"The kitchen. I can't go back alone."

"Has anything happened to Doug?"

"Oh, God!" she said. "A milk bottle!"

There was no questioning her here and now and while she was in this state. I said, "I'll be with you in a minute," and went back into the bungalow.

I gathered clothes in the dark bedroom and dressed in the bathroom so as not to disturb Greta. On the way out of the bungalow I picked up a flashlight because the road was unlighted, and a thin poplin windbreaker.

Lorna Elliott was waiting for me on the road. The spray of porch light just about reached where she stood with her hair loose over her shoulders and her legs and feet bare and her figure small and slender in that scanty robe. She looked like a forlorn child that had wandered from home.

"Here, put this on," I said, offering her the windbreaker.

She didn't accept it. Without a word she made an abrupt half-turn and started across the road, into darkness. I snapped on the flashlight and hurried after her.

There was no sidewalk by that blacktop road. Summer bungalows mingled with all-year-round houses strung out on either side. The only lights anywhere were the pale flashlight beam behind which we walked and those on my porch and ahead in the windows of her place. Everything else was dark.

I said, "What's this about a bottle?"

She stumbled, perhaps stubbing a bare toe on an uneven spot in the blacktop. I caught her arm and she sagged against me. The pressure of her scantily clad body made me feel clumsy and uneasy.

"Let's get along," I said gently.

She straightened up, shivering—the first sign that she felt the coolness of the night. Without asking her, I draped the windbreaker over her shoulders. She said dully, "Thank you," and resumed walking.

When we were almost at her bungalow, somebody spoke in the night. "Was it you who screamed, Lorna?"

I swung my light. Mrs. Reed was rising from a lawn chair in front of her fieldstone house next door to the Elliott bungalow. She wore a white housecoat the way she wore everything else on her opulent figure—adheringly.

The most Mrs. Reed and I had ever said to each other was hello, with maybe a comment on the weather. I knew nothing about her except that she was a widow whose two teen-age children were away working in a summer camp. Her hair, dyed red, straggled over her brow in girlish bangs.

I dipped my light away from her face as she came toward us. "What did you hear?" I asked her.

"I was asleep when a scream woke me." Mrs. Reed took a cigarette from her mouth and flicked ashes. "I thought the Elliotts were having one of their rows and he was beating her up."

Lorna, huddled at my side, raised her head. "It's a lie! He never beat me."

"Well, I heard that scream and I got out of bed and looked out of a window. In a little while I saw you run out of the house practically naked." I could

visualize Mrs. Reed's fleshy mouth curling. "I see you're afraid to go back alone."

Lorna fled from her, hurrying to her bungalow next door, as silent as a ghost on her bare feet.

"I hope I didn't upset her—" Mrs. Reed sounded almost as if she meant it—"though of course she was already upset. It's not the first time they've had a fight. This last week especially I've had to listen to them going at it hammer and tongs. Really, I don't see what he sees in her. He's so devilishly handsome and she's so—well, mousy."

"Some other time," I snapped at her, and strode after Lorna.

She had paused at the wide-open front door. When I was within a few feet of her, she turned and entered ahead of me. I had a sense of being lured, of being brought into something without any will on my part.

The Elliott bungalow was much like ours—a one-story, one-bedroom structure. You entered directly into the living room from the open porch. I closed the door behind me and saw she had stopped halfway across the room. But not this time to wait for me. She was staring down at a garment on the floor.

It was a nightgown, and on it were large red splotches.

I stooped for a closer look, though I already knew what had made those splotches. Straightening, I said, "Did you say he's in the kitchen?"

"Yes. That door. I can't go in there again."

I crossed the dinette and pushed open the door. Under the bright kitchen dome light Doug Elliott lay on the floor.

Though he was flat on his back, not much of his once handsome face was visible. Blood covered it, and blood had dyed most of his blond hair. All around him the pale-green linoleum looked as if somebody had swung an open can of red paint. It had spattered the refrigerator and the metal cabinets, the sink and the stove and the worktable. I had seen plenty of head wounds in the past, but it always surprised me how much blood a human being had in him.

And there was the broken glass—the thick, curved, murky pieces of glass scattered all over the floor. The biggest was between the legs of the overturned step-stool—the neck of a milk bottle with the cap still on it.

I touched nothing but the wrist of an outflung arm to feel for a pulse. Then I rose, thinking of the bloody nightgown in the other room—and of that quiet woman waiting there like a lost child.

4

SHE WAS SITTING ON THE SOFA WITH HER legs tucked under her. Her wide eyes watched me come through the kitchen door and close it and cross the dinette.

"He's dead, isn't he?" she said.

I nodded. "Didn't you know he was when you went for me?"

"I thought he was, but when you were in the kitchen I started to hope."

Her voice was back to normal—a low-pitched, gentle voice. Her face now looked merely very tired. Perhaps she had more iron in her than I had supposed from the way the shock had hit her.

"Did you call a doctor?" I asked her.

"No."

"Or the police?"

"No."

"Only a private detective," I mutter-

ed and moved farther into the room.

She had hung my windbreaker neatly over the back of a chair, and she had taken the nightgown away. I asked her what she had done with the nightgown.

"I threw it into the shower stall," she said.

"You're not supposed to touch anything. The police—" I paused. "I better get at doing what you should have done yourself—call the police."

The phone was in the far corner of the living room. I had almost reached it when she said, "You think I killed him. Everybody will think so."

I turned. "Didn't you?"

"No."

"All right, we can take another minute," I said. "When the police get here, they won't let me near you. What's the story?"

Lorna's face dipped and her loose hair fell over her cheek. "After you brought me home from the theater tonight I went right to bed. Voices in the house woke me."

"What time was that?"

"I don't even know what time it is now."

"Past two."

"It may have been as long ago as twelve o'clock, if Doug came directly home after the show. Or much later. I've no idea. I awoke and lay listening to the voices."

"Did you recognize them?"

"No. The bedroom door was closed and there was just a muttering and I was half-asleep. I assumed that somebody had dropped in with Doug for a nightcap, probably somebody from the cast. I must have fallen asleep again because suddenly I awoke with a start. Something heavy had fallen with a loud thump. I sat up in bed and called Doug's name. He didn't answer, but I heard a door close. The back door, I'm sure, leading from the kitchen. Then it was very quiet in the house and I dropped back on the pillow."

"You mean to say you didn't come out to see what had happened?"

"Not then. I didn't know anything had happened. I'd merely heard something fall. It could have been anything knocked over, like a chair. And I thought Doug had gone out with whoever had been visiting him—had walked him to his car and was standing outside talking to him. And then for the third time I woke up."

"How long after?"

"I don't know that either. A minute or an hour later. My heart was beating violently. I couldn't understand why. I hadn't had a bad dream or anything like that. I lay listening to the stillness."

"The fact that he hadn't come to bed —was that what was bothering you?"

She looked away from me. "We've been quarreling lately. Cora Reed was right about that much. He's been sleeping in the living room, on the daybed. So it wasn't that. Maybe I had a premonition."

I didn't have much confidence in premonitions, but I didn't say it. I waited for her to go on.

"I got out of bed," she said, "and came out here to the living room. He wasn't in the daybed and all the lights were on, in this room and the dinette, and the kitchen door was partly open and I could see light in there too. Something seemed terribly wrong."

"Why?"

"I told you," she said irritably. "It

was a feeling. I went into the kitchen and there was Doug on the floor. I can't remember screaming, but I guess I did if Cora Reed says so. There was all that blood . . ."

She pressed her forearm against her mouth.

I waited a long moment and then said, "Do you remember what you did then?"

"I turned him over on his back. He was face down, all crumpled. It wasn't easy to turn him over. Then I saw the pieces of the milk bottle." She dug her teeth into the fleshy part of her arm. "I ran out of the kitchen."

"A while ago you said you only thought he was dead. Didn't you make sure?"

"He looked dead."

"So you couldn't have been sure. Yet you didn't call a doctor. Or, for that matter, the police."

"I was alone. I was afraid. I had to get out of the house and bring somebody back with me right away."

"But you took time to remove your nightgown."

"I had to. His blood had gotten on it when I turned him over. I pulled it off and some of the blood had soaked through. I couldn't stand it on my body; I washed it off in the bathroom. This robe was hanging on a hook. I put it on and ran without even going into the bedroom for slippers."

"Ran for a private detective," I said harshly. "You had time for everything except make a phone call."

She huddled in the corner of the sofa, looking colder here in the house than she had in the street. "You see, you don't believe me."

"I'm raising the questions the police will ask. And they'll have a lot more."

"You were a neighbor, a person I knew. I need somebody desperately."

"But most of all somebody who knows his way around in a murder. That's why I was more important than a doctor, why you brought me here before calling the police. What did you expect I'd be able to do to save you?"

Lorna drew the top of her robe tight and said nothing. She looked so forlorn cowering there on the sofa that I had to harden myself against her. She might very well have been putting on an act since the moment we had faced each other on the porch.

"And if you're innocent," I went on, "why are you so dead sure nobody will believe you?"

"Because—" she whispered and stopped and dipped her head.

"Because Doug wanted to get rid of you? Was that your motive?"

The stricken look in her eyes made me sorry I had put it so bluntly. After all, I was no prosecuting attorney, I was no cop.

She rose from the sofa. She said listlessly, "I'll get dressed for the police," and shuffled into the bedroom.

I went to the phone and put through the call to police headquarters.

After I had given the desk sergeant brief details, he asked my name. "Ben Helm?" he repeated, evidently writing it down. "Say, aren't you the shamus who's living here this summer?"

"Uh-huh."

"The chief was talking about you the other day. Friend of yours. You write books and stuff about police work, don't you? And your wife is that actress over to the playhouse—Greta Murdock. Say, she's a honey. Tell me something: how

come her last name isn't the same as yours if she's your wife?"

"Listen," I said, managing to break in after the third or fourth try when he paused for breath. "I told you a murder—"

"Hold your horses. The boys are getting ready to roll and I've gotten the chief and the D.A. out of bed. Elliott's missus has already called in."

"Mrs. Elliott? Did she say she was Mrs. Elliott?"

"Too upset, I guess. All she said was Douglas Elliott was murdered in his house on Maple Road, and then—bang! —she hung up before I could ask who she was. I figured it was his missus. Wasn't it?"

"It couldn't have been. She was with me. She brought me over here from my bungalow across the road. Are you sure the woman said Elliott was murdered?"

"How would I know he was murdered if she didn't say so? One of these screwy anonymous calls. Could be the killer even."

"Could be."

"Hang around till the chief gets there. And don't touch anything, you hear?"

"I've had some experience with police routine," I said.

"I guess you have, at that. I admire you, Helm."

"Thanks."

"Yeah, I admire you for being married to that good-looking actress." Chuckling, he hung up.

Whoever he was, he was quite a card.

I went over to one of the two windows in the side of the living room. Next door Mrs. Reed's white housecoat made a pale splotch in front of her house and a cigarette glowed where her mouth would be. She was waiting there in darkness on the lawn chair.

And I waited in the bungalow and thought of Doug Elliott having asked me that afternoon how, if a divorce was too dirty for me, I would like a nice clean murder. At the time I had put that down as a sarcastic crack. Maybe it had been and maybe not, but the fact was that he was the one who now lay in his own blood with his head bashed in by a milk bottle.

A car charged up the road and stopped in front of the bungalow with brakes squealing. The police had arrived. And Lorna Elliott, trim in a subdued cotton dress, came out of the bedroom.

5

Chief of Police Clem Hutch was a frail old man who was past retirement age, but insisted on sticking to his job. What biased me in his favor was that he'd read some of my articles and books on criminology. When he'd heard I was spending the summer in West Amber, he'd invited me to headquarters to look over his equipment, which was pretty good for so small a city. After that we'd spent a couple of evenings together shooting the breeze. We got along.

This was more than I was to do with District Attorney Roy Coleman, whom I didn't meet until the night Doug Elliott was killed.

Coleman showed up, cleanly shaven and nattily dressed, half an hour later than the police chief. He was in his early thirties, with most of his political life ahead of him. There had been nothing like a major crime, let alone a murder, in the county since he'd taken of-

fice in January, and before he was well inside the Elliott bungalow he was bawling out Clem Hutch.

It seemed that the Fire Department emergency ambulance had been called out. It couldn't do anything for a dead man, but it was a brand-new ambulance, recently purchased by public subscription, and here was a chance for it to roll. Half the volunteer firemen had come along with it; they were crowding the porch and peering in through windows and trampling the ground all around the bungalow.

"I hadn't anything to do with it," Hutch told Coleman. "Must've been Bob Lang, he's at the desk tonight."

"Send 'em away."

"You send 'em. Firemen don't take orders from me. Or from you, either."

The district attorney shifted his attack. "Where's Mrs. Elliott?" he snapped.

"In her room. Said she was feeling faint."

"You left her there alone?"

Hutch sighed. "I was a cop when you was in diapers. One of my men is with her, making sure she doesn't cut her throat. The body's in the kitchen, if you can stand the sight of blood."

Coleman jabbed a finger at me. "Who're you?"

"My name is Ben Helm. I—"

"The private eye?" he snorted.

I didn't like being called a private eye. It made me sound like one of those fantastic characters on the TV shows.

"I'm here as a private citizen," I said. And I told him how Lorna Elliott had brought me over from my place.

Coleman grunted, "Wait here," and he and Hutch went into the kitchen where the coroner, who was a house painter by trade, was waiting for a doctor to arrive and examine the body. A few minutes later they passed through the living room to the bathroom for a look at the bloody nightgown Lorna had tossed into the shower stall.

This time I tagged after them. When they came out, I said, "There's something else you ought to know. Yesterday afternoon Elliott approached me to investigate his wife. He was after divorce or annulment evidence."

"Ah." Coleman smiled. "Who's the man?"

"I don't know there is a man. We never got to discuss it because I turned him down."

"Why?"

"I don't go in for that kind of job."

"You better not hold out on me, Helm. If you think that just because you're a private eye you can play fast and loose, you've got the wrong customer."

I felt myself flush. Before I could answer, Clem Hutch put in, "Ben's a high-type investigator, Roy. He'll cooperate all he can."

"I don't care what type he is, I don't want any outside investigator in my hair. Get that, Helm?"

I shrugged. "This is your baby, not mine."

"I'm glad you admit it." Coleman put his hand on the bedroom doorknob and paused. "But you're a witness—anyway, after the fact. Anything else you have to tell me?"

"Uh-huh. You might ask Mrs. Reed next door what she knows about the anonymous call to the police."

"What anonymous call?"

"When I reported the murder to the desk sergeant, he'd already got a call on it a few minutes before," I said. "A

woman who hung up without giving her name. He assumed it was Mrs. Elliott, but it couldn't have been because she'd been with me at the time."

"And you're saying Mrs. Reed was the one?"

"All I'm suggesting is that you ask her."

"I propose to question everybody I can. You go home. I'll get in touch with you when I want you."

Coleman yanked open the bedroom door and he and Hutch went in. I glimpsed Lorna sitting quietly on a chair with her hands limp on her lap and a hulking uniformed cop standing against a window. Then the door was slammed in my face.

I picked up my windbreaker in the living room and left the bungalow.

Outside I found the road jammed with cars and everywhere people were revealed by the crossing beams of headlights and flashlights. Aside from the volunteer firemen, there were the usual sightseers brought out even at that hour by the siren and neighbors roused by the excitement. Among them was Greta, and she was with Abbott Fowler, the producer and director. He lived several miles away.

"Did she really do it, Ben?" he asked.

"It could have been anybody," I said. "What brought you here?"

"Sheer coincidence. I happened to be driving by and stopped to see what was up." Fowler wrung his hands. He was a shaggy bear of a man, but he was given to womanish gestures. "What are we going to do? Marv Dillson could step into Doug's role, but he will need at least an extra day for polish. Do you think we should cancel tomorrow night, Greta?"

She said thinly, "Must you talk about it now?"

"I know, I know. I don't mean to be cold-hearted. Doug was a friend of mine. But you know the tradition of the theater. The show must go on and all that. I'll get Marv out of bed and ask him if he feels he can go on by tomorrow night."

He strode off toward the jumble of cars. Greta and I started toward our bungalow.

"Is it true what I hear, that he was killed with a milk bottle?" she said.

"There was a broken bottle on the floor, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was the weapon. Though probably. The post-mortem will show."

"A milk bottle! It sounds ridiculous."

"It's a weapon," I said. "A club. The kind of thing somebody grabs up in murderous rage."

"Lorna?"

"She says she didn't."

We were on the porch. We sat down on the wicker settee and I told her the story Lorna had told me.

When I finished, Greta said firmly, "Then she didn't do it. I think she would have admitted it if she had."

I shrugged. "What do you know about the Elliotts?"

"Well, Doug and I were in a few Broadway plays together. He was like me, a second-rate actor."

"You're not second-rate."

"Thank you, darling, but we both know I'll never be a star. Except in a summer theater. I'll finish out my career in second-rate roles. Doug would never have gotten any farther either."

"Tell me about his wife."

"I never met her until this summer. I understand they were married less

than a year. She's very sweet, but hardly the type I expected Doug to fall in love with."

"What was his type?"

"A more obviously sexy woman, I suppose. And not so quiet. But it seems I was wrong."

"You were right. He wanted a divorce. That's what he spoke to me about this afternoon. He offered me the job to dig up the dirt."

"Of course you didn't take it?"

"No. The theater is full of rumors and gossip. Have you heard anything about her and another man?"

"Not a word. I can't imagine it. She seemed very much in love with Doug." Greta leaned forward to look up the road at the cars and people and brightly lighted bungalow. "It would have been different if you'd asked me the same question about him."

"Was he a chaser?"

"Um. And with his good looks there were many women he didn't have to chase. He just had to stand still and let them catch him."

"Anybody specifically this summer?"

"Nobody I've heard of, really." She faced me on the settee, and under the porch light her black eyes were very grave. "It could have been the husband or the boy friend of some woman he was carrying on with."

"The fact is that he wanted Lorna investigated, not the other way around."

Greta had no answer to that, and silently now we sat side by side on the porch, looking up the road.

After a while the crowd stirred and the hubbub of voices rose louder. We saw Lorna Elliott come out of her bungalow accompanied by Police Chief Clem Hutch. Together they got into a car.

Greta put her hand on my knees. "Darling, you're abandoning her."

"Me? What have I got to do with her?"

"She came to you for help. She had nobody else."

"If she did it—"

"If? You can't be sure. She needs you, darling."

"What she needs," I said grimly, "is a good trial lawyer." I stood up. "Let's go to bed."

6

AT ELEVEN NEXT MORNING I STOPPED IN AT police headquarters, which also housed the city jail, and told Clem Hutch that I would like to see Lorna Elliott.

He looked me over from behind his desk. "What's your interest in her, Ben?"

"I've been wondering if there's *anybody* interested in her. Has she got a lawyer yet?"

"Says she doesn't want one."

"What about family?"

"Says she hasn't any. Fact is, getting her to say anything is worse than pulling teeth. She knows one word, and that's no. Did she kill him? No. Has she a boy friend? No. And sometimes she doesn't even say no, just sits with her hands on her lap and doesn't answer."

The police chief tilted back in his chair. "I asked you, Ben, what's your interest in her?"

"It's a little hard to explain. I shouldn't have been so rough on her last night when she told me her story. I think that made her feel she hadn't a chance,

that she was completely abandoned."

"Why? Are you somebody special to her?"

"I think I was at the time—somebody to turn to. And I let her down. I should at least have tried to be more understanding."

Hutch said gruffly, "What's to understand? I got the reports a little while ago. The milk bottle was what killed him, all right. Bits of glass found in the wound. He was smacked at least three times. First couple of times the bottle full of milk didn't break, maybe only knocked him out. But she kept at it till there was no bottle and he was dead."

"What about fingerprints on the glass?"

"Mostly smudges, but one print pretty clear. Hers."

"Why not, if she put the bottles into the refrigerator when they arrived?"

"All the same, the print's part of the larger picture."

I took out my pipe and tobacco pouch. "The picture, at any rate, isn't one of cold-blooded murder. You don't premeditate murder with a milk bottle. She was in a mood to talk to me last night. Maybe she wasn't telling the truth, and it's sure she didn't tell the whole truth. But if I'd been a bit more sympathetic . . ." I struck a match.

"That's another thing," Hutch said. "You took your own sweet time to report the murder."

"Did you get that from Mrs. Elliott?"

"No, from Cora Reed." Hutch stroked his lean jaw. "You were right last night. She was the one called in before you got around to it. Admitted it freely."

"Well, now," I said.

"Don't make too much of it. I know Cora Reed. She's the town gossip. Never happy unless she's got her nose in somebody's business. She says a scream got her out of bed and then she saw Mrs. Elliott run out of the house and a little while later come back with you. She says she figured Mrs. Elliott had a fight with her husband and got curious about what was going on with you in there with them.

"So she sneaked up and looked through a window and saw you coming out of the kitchen and heard you say something about him being dead. Then she went around to the back and looked through the glass window in the door and saw him lying all bloody on the floor. She says it didn't look like you were going to call the police, so she went back to her house and did it herself."

"You believe her?"

"Sure. It's just the way she'd act."

I stoked my pipe with the back of a match. "You can't object to me seeing Mrs. Elliott."

"Who's objecting? Could be she'll talk to you. I'll have her brought up."

"I must insist on being alone with her, Clem."

He gave me a half-grin. "Sometimes you're a hard guy to get along with."

"Sometimes."

He went out. It was a full ten minutes before a cop came in and led me down the hall to a small room furnished only with a long, cigarette-scarred table and a number of wooden chairs. Lorna Elliott sat in one of the chairs.

The cop said, "I'll be outside," and closed the door behind me.

"Hello, Lorna," I said.

She glanced up at me and then dropped her eyes to her hands lying limply

on her lap.

I pulled up a chair and sat facing her. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"Thank you, but I need nothing."

"At the least, you need a lawyer."

She didn't answer.

"If there's a trial," I persisted, "the state will appoint one for you, so you might as well have one now."

"It doesn't matter."

"Don't you care what happens?"

She looked up at me then with stricken eyes. "I care, but nobody else does or will."

"I'd like to help you."

"You?" She stirred a little on the chair. "I don't wish to hire a private detective."

"I'm not after a job. I turned one down Doug offered me yesterday. Do you know about that?"

"Mr. Coleman told me. He wanted to know what Doug was after."

"Well, what was he after?"

"Doug told you. He wanted to divorce me."

"Why?"

She said tonelessly, "I suppose he no longer cared for me."

"Who did he care for?"

"I don't know." She looked up. "I was faithful to him. I had no—no lover." Her hands moved on her lap. "But nobody will believe that."

"I think I do. He said he didn't want me to go looking around in beds." She caught her lower lip between her teeth and I added quickly, "I'm sorry, but I'm quoting him. I cut him off before he could tell me what he wanted me to go looking for. Don't you see, that's the case against you? They'll say you killed him to stop him."

"I didn't kill him."

"All right, then maybe you can help find who did."

"How can I?"

"By not holding anything back."

She just sat there.

I sucked my pipe and let a minute of brittle silence pass and then said, "Are you protecting somebody?"

Her fists clenched. "Let me alone. Why can't everybody let me alone!"

"I'm trying to help you."

"Let me alone!" She was on her feet, shrieking the words.

The door flew open. "What's going on?" the cop demanded.

Lorna drew in a sobbing breath, and abruptly her face was composed and her voice returned to its normal quietness.

"Take me back to my cell, officer," she said wearily.

7

AFTER LUNCH ABBOTT FOWLER PHONED Greta to tell her that he was calling the company together at two o'clock. I drove her to the theater.

On the way Greta said, "Darling, I'm glad you've decided to help Lorna."

"A lot of help she'll let me be to her," I growled.

Six or eight other cars were scattered on the theater parking lot. We walked around to the main entrance, and on the broad lawn Otto Brick, the custodian and handyman, was leaning on a power mower watching Clem Hutch write in a pad.

"Like I told Mr. Coleman, I don't pay attention to none of 'em," Otto said. He was a bony man with a craggy face and a sweeping, messy, gray mustache drooping over a sad mouth. "I do what

I'm paid for and mind my own business."

Clem Hutch saw us coming up to him and tipped his hat. "Afternoon, Mrs.—" His pinched face grinned. "I never know if I should call you Mrs. Helm or Miss Murdock."

"Call me Greta."

"Sure thing, Greta. Ben, I'm working on a time schedule. The doc says Elliott was killed around one o'clock, but you know how they are. When I tried to pin him down, he talked about room temperatures and age and state of health and ended up by saying give or take an hour. So to play safe I put the killing between twelve and two o'clock."

"Getting anywhere?" I asked.

He frowned at the pad. "I got two pages—one for alibis and the other for when he was last seen alive. Alibis? Not worth a damn. Seems everybody but Fowler was in the sack long before two o'clock, but most of them sleep alone and so can't prove it. Fowler, the director, was out in his car. Says he was driving around aimlessly. Says it helps him to think when he's driving, and he was thinking about how to do the play he was getting ready to put on next week."

"He was outside the bungalow last night when I left," I said.

"He told me. Saw the crowd and stopped off. Okay, now you two." He smiled apologetically. "You understand, Ben, I have to check everybody who knew Elliott."

"We went to bed at midnight," I said.

"The thing about married couples, they alibi each other at night." He made a notation on his pad. "Now, Otto—"

At that moment Fowler appeared at the wide main entrance. "There you are, Greta. May I see you?"

She joined him and together they entered the theater. Hutch, sweltering under the hot sun in his police uniform, took off his hat and wiped his brow. Then he said, "I was asking you, Otto, if you noticed what time Elliott left the theater last night."

Otto Brick leaned against the mower handle. "And I told you, I don't pay attention. I got my work to do after the show is over."

"You mean clean the place?"

"I straighten up a little and close the windows and lock up. The real cleaning I do in the morning."

"Then you ought to know by what time everybody was out."

"Lemme see." Otto fingered his droopy mustache. "This show ends at ten after eleven. Say it takes the actors half an hour to dress and leave. Yeah, it was around a quarter to twelve when I made sure everybody was out and locked the doors." He stopped and started the mower engine. "I got work to do," he complained and walked off behind the whirring mower.

Hutch sighed and tapped his pad. "You don't think this will get me anywhere, do you, Ben?"

"I suppose it's got to be done, according to the police manuals."

"The D.A. says I'm wasting time. Says we know who did it, so what do we need this stuff for? He's taken over Fowler's office and is questioning them one at a time to try to get a line on who Mrs. Elliott's boy friend is."

We were strolling over the lawn toward the stage end of the theater. I said, "Perhaps some time ought to be spent on Doug Elliott's girl friends."

"Say he had one. He was going to get

a divorce from his wife, wasn't he? So where would a girl friend have a gripe against him?"

"Uh-huh. Tell me something, Clem. What do you know about Mrs. Reed?"

"Cora Reed?" He stopped walking. "You're barking up the wrong tree. I've known Cora for years. Visits with my wife. Maybe she works her mouth too much, but she's a fine, decent woman with two nice children."

"She told me she couldn't understand what a handsome man like Elliott could see in his wife."

"So what? She's always wagging her tongue. You can take my word, she's not the kind carries on with another woman's husband."

I said around the stem of my pipe, "I'm thinking of a ripe, lonely widow living next door to a handsome wolf."

"Ben, there's one thing I learned being a cop in a small place like West Amber. You don't go around tearing people's reputations apart unless you have good reason."

"Right," I agreed. "But as a cop you have to consider every possibility. Look at what's being done to Mrs. Elliott's reputation. It may be justified, but—"

An angry voice rose in the building, shouting, "That's right, I'll say it again. He's no loss to anybody, especially not to his wife."

The voice came from the wing that housed the producer-director's office. Hutch and I walked on, and through the open door we saw District Attorney Coleman sitting behind a desk, and Marvin Dillson on his feet.

Dillson was in his early twenties, the slender, collar-ad type of actor. He hadn't done much with the couple of minor roles I'd seen him in. He had been Doug Elliott's understudy.

Coleman beamed up at him. "Then you admit you cared for Mrs. Elliott?"

"I admired her."

"And what did you do about your admiration?"

"Not a damn thing." Dillson pushed both hands flat on the desk and leaned on them. "Maybe I would have if she'd ever given me a tumble. I don't know. The fact is she never knew any other man was alive but that heel of a husband of hers."

"Yet she killed him."

Dillson pulled back from the desk and licked his upper lip. "I wouldn't know. If she did, it's no less than he deserved."

Coleman turned his head and saw us standing outside the door. He said, "Come in, Clem. I may have something here." Then he jabbed a finger. "You, Helm—perhaps the police chief can't run his department without you, but I don't need you. Beat it."

I yanked my pipe out of my mouth, and Hutch grabbed my arm as if to stop me from storming into the office and taking a swing at the district attorney. Probably I wanted to, but I had never let my temper get the better of me. Once you did that, you stopped being a rational civilized being. I said, "Don't worry, Clem, he's not worth it," and strode up the gravel walk along the side of the theater to the main entrance.

All the company except Dillson was on the stage. Abbott Fowler, shaggy and bearish and sweating, stood on the apron facing them like a lecturer and told them that he had decided not to cancel tonight's performance.

Unobtrusively I sat down in an aisle

seat and loaded my pipe. On the stage Greta wiggled her fingers at me.

"We can't wait for the police to get out from underfoot," Fowler was saying. "Marv knows the lines, but it's an extremely demanding role, and we have only a few hours to integrate him into it. Of course he's not the actor Doug was, but—" He broke off with only a little confusion as Marvin Dillson came out of the office by way of the door to the right of the stage. "Ah, Marv, now we can get started. That is, if the police will stop disrupting."

"Who knows what they'll do?" Stiff-legged and white-faced, Dillson ascended the stage steps. "Now they have Alice Brick in there. What can they want from the kid?"

Fowler sighed. "The devious police mind. All right, let's set the opening scene."

Some of the actors set the props. Greta settled herself on the sofa with a magazine. Fowler said, "Curtain!" and after a moment an offstage bell rang. Greta moved to admit Dillson—and the D.A. strode out of the office.

Coleman looked at the stage, then he looked at me halfway up the aisle, then he said in a loud voice of authority, "Miss Murdock, will you come this way?" He jabbed his finger. "You too, Helm."

Fowler slammed his script down on a prop table and cursed fervently.

I went to the stage steps and waited for Greta to come down and together we followed Coleman into the office. In there Hutch stood against a wall and carefully didn't look at us. Alice Brick sat with her legs straight down like a tense school girl, but there wasn't anything schoolgirlish about her nubile figure. She didn't look at us either.

"Helm, I want you to hear this," Coleman said briskly when he had resumed his seat behind the desk. "It concerns your wife, and it may more directly involve you. Miss Brick, please repeat what you've told me."

Alice squirmed on her chair. "It really wasn't anything."

"I'll be the judge of that. What did you see three nights ago?"

Alice spoke down to her knees. "I saw Doug Elliott making love to Greta Murdock."

I glanced sidelong at Greta. A patch of deep color touched her cheek.

"Go on, Miss Brick," Coleman said. "Where did you see this?"

"Sometimes I like to watch from the wings. In the middle of the second act that night I slipped out of my seat way in back and walked along the outside to the stage door. There's a big hydrangea bush, and they were standing together in its shadow. I guess they were waiting for their cues. She was in his arms. They sprang apart when they saw me."

Greta said, "This is ridiculous."

"Do you deny it happened?" Coleman asked with a faint smile.

"I deny it was anything like what Alice thought she saw. Doug was—well, Doug was what he was, a man who couldn't keep his hands to himself. I was offstage for a few minutes and went outside for a breath of air. Suddenly he appeared and threw his arms about me. Of course I pulled away from him. That was what Alice must have seen, me pulling away from him. As a matter of fact, I didn't know she was there at all until a moment later when I was hurrying back inside."

"Was it the first time?"

"That he had been too free with his hands?" Greta said. "No. And I was by no means the only one."

Somebody was standing outside on the walk, listening to what was being said in the office the way Hutch and I had listened some minutes before. I took a step toward the door and saw it was Otto Brick.

My eyes shifted and met Hutch's gaze. This time he didn't look away. I knew what Hutch was thinking—that a little while ago I had suggested that Mrs. Reed might be having an affair with Elliott, and now this about my wife.

"Did you know about this, Helm?" Coleman was asking.

I blew smoke toward him. "Know about what?"

"About Elliott and your wife?"

"There was nothing to know. You heard her explanation."

Coleman's smile broadened; he was enjoying this. "I've an idea running around my head. It goes something like this. The only thing we've heard about Elliott having wanted a divorce was what you told us. Just your word. Could be a diversion on your part to misdirect suspicion from yourself to Mrs. Elliott."

Greta opened her mouth to say something. I beat her to it, saying, "What is it, Coleman, have you lost confidence in your case against Mrs. Elliott?"

"I'm merely not being single-minded about it. There are other possibilities."

Hutch spoke up then. "You're way off base, Roy. Ben has a perfect alibi. He and his wife were in bed from twelve on."

"So they say." Coleman flexed his shoulders, feeling his muscles. "Even if they're not trying to protect each other, one of them could have slipped out for a few minutes while the other slept."

I said, "Greta, go back to your rehearsal. He hasn't got a thing, and if he doesn't know it somebody ought to take him by the hand and tell him."

She looked at me and touched my arm and obeyed without question. Coleman didn't try to stop her. When the door closed behind her, I turned back to him.

"If you're worried I'll take any credit from you in this case, don't take it out on my wife."

His finger came out. "Don't get smart with me. I don't propose to have any private eye from New York tell me—"

He was interrupted by Otto Brick striding into the office. Otto had been listening outside and now he wanted to be inside. His face was like a crag and his mustache had become fierce as a pirate's. His daughter cowered before him.

"Alice, I told you again and again, I don't want you hanging around these actors," he stormed. "They're no good."

"What do you know about this?" Coleman demanded.

Otto swung around. "I'm around all the time. I see. They're no good, these actors and actresses."

"You mean Greta Murdock?" Coleman said smoothly.

"I don't know nothing about Miss Murdock. Maybe she's a good lady. My daughter, I don't want her making trouble for nobody, and I don't want her to get in trouble." His bony hand closed over Alice's arm. "You come home where you belong."

"Just a minute," Coleman snapped.

Paying no attention to him, Otto

dragged his daughter out.

There was nothing for me, there either, so I went back to the theater and sat through the interminable rehearsal. Marvin Dillson was having his big chance in a lead role, and he wasn't doing too badly. They weren't through until close to six o'clock, and only then, as Greta and I were driving home, did we have a chance to say a word to each other.

She said the word, "Darling, I hope you haven't even a small doubt."

"No."

"He was a pest. Always after me."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You might have made a fuss with him. He wasn't worth it. I can take care of myself. Whenever I can't, I'll let you know."

"Do that," I said, and I took my right hand off the wheel and reached for her hand.

8

THE PHONE RANG WHILE I WAS WASHING the supper dishes and Greta was lying down to rest for the performance. District Attorney Coleman was on the wire.

"You'll be interested in this," he said. "Seems Lorna Elliott makes a practice of killing husbands with milk bottles. It all happened once before a couple years ago. A different husband and a different bottle, but everything else was the same."

I didn't say anything.

"Helm, did you hear me?"

"Uh-huh. You didn't call to tell me this because you thought I'd be interested."

"I'm here in Chief Hutch's office. Would you like to join us?"

"I don't get it. Why this sudden change of mood?"

Coleman's light laughter tinkled over the wire. "There's nothing to be gained by us being at loggerheads. We'll get a lot further working together."

There was no point asking him what he had up his sleeve. He wouldn't tell me; anyway, I'd find out soon enough. It was five to eight, about time for Greta to get started for the theater.

I said, "I'll be there in twenty minutes," and hung up.

I woke Greta and finished washing what dishes remained in the sink and put on a fresh shirt. By then she was ready. I drove her to the theater and from there went to police headquarters. Coleman and Hutch were waiting patiently for me.

Coleman was still amiable. He said, "Of course I at once started a check on Lorna Elliott's past. I learned that until two years ago she'd been married to a man named George Doane. They lived in Detroit where Doane taught in a private school. A short time ago a report on her arrived from the Detroit police. She'd been tried on a charge of murdering Doane with a milk bottle and acquitted."

"What grounds?" I asked.

"Self-defense. You see, that time she had admitted it from the first. Needless to say, this can't even be mentioned to a jury, but . . ." Coleman smiled.

"But," I said, "you may be sure any jurors trying her for Elliott's killing will have read about the other killing. And they'll believe there's a pattern."

"Well, isn't there?"

"I don't know. What does Mrs. Elliott say?"

Coleman's face clouded. "She refuses

to talk about it. Though after a while she said she would if you were present."

"Get it now, Ben?" Clem Hutch chuckled. "See why he's suddenly getting so palsy with you? He's got to get her to talking and he can do it only with you around."

Coleman said, "I trust you'll co-operate, Helm. She confessed the murder of her first husband. If she's handled right, she can be induced to confess the murder of her second husband."

"If she did it," I added.

Coleman got a look on his face of a man about to start an argument, but he thought better of it. He needed me badly—anyway, for the time being. Lorna Elliott was sent for.

She came in with her hands folded. Very quietly she said hello to me and moved to the chair Hutch pulled out for her. She put her head back and looked at me with quiet eyes.

"I'm confused and frightened and terribly alone," she said. "This morning you offered to help me. Ben, I think after all you're my friend."

"I am, Lorna."

"I'm afraid of these men," she said. "Their job is to have me executed."

"By no means," Coleman put in. "There may be extenuating circumstances. If you'll just tell the truth . . ."

Lorna didn't turn her head to him. She kept her eyes on me, speaking to me as if the other two men weren't in the room at all. "Four years ago I visited my sister in Detroit and met George Doane and after a month we were married. We would have been very happy except for one thing. He was insanely jealous."

"Did you give him reason?" Coleman asked.

"No. Never. They tried to show in the trial that he had reason, but of course they couldn't. His jealousy was a sickness. He became furious when a man looked at me in the street or I stopped to say a few words to a neighbor. Then one evening he went to a teacher's meeting at the school where he taught and I went to the movies with my sister Marge. In the theater we ran across one of Marge's husband's friends and he offered to drive us home. He lived near me, so he dropped Marge off first.

"George was home before me and he looked out of the window and saw me get out of the man's car. George was beside himself when I came into the house. He was convinced I had been out on a date with the man. I couldn't make him believe the truth."

She unfolded her hands and spread them on her thighs. "George went out of his mind. He stood shouting at me, accusing me of all sorts of horrible things. Suddenly he began to hit me. He had never done such a thing before. He grabbed me by the throat and started to choke me. We were in the kitchen. I had taken a bottle of milk out of the refrigerator to pour myself a glass. I don't know if George would have choked me to death. Probably he would have let me go. But he was choking me and as I struggled I picked up the bottle from the table.

"I didn't want to kill him or even hurt him. But I didn't want to die and I was as crazy with fear as he was with jealousy and I hit him with the bottle to make him let me go. It crashed on his head. He fell away from me and crumpled to the floor. Neighbors had heard him yelling and me screaming. I let them in, and when they looked at

George he was dead."

Lorna Elliott slumped panting in the chair, having relived that scene in the telling.

After a brief silence, Coleman said, "As I understand it, there was a trial and you were acquitted."

"Yes."

"Where did you meet Doug Elliott?"

"Last August in New York. I couldn't stay in Detroit after the trial. I moved to New York and got a job in an office. For a year I was alone. I didn't go out with anybody. Then I met Doug and he was kind and I fell in love with him and we were married."

I said, "Did you tell him about your first husband?"

"Yes."

"Everything?"

"Yes."

Coleman said, "All right, now, Mrs. Elliott. What about your second husband being killed in the same way?"

Cringing, Lorna put her hands to her face. "When I found Doug dead in the kitchen, it was like a nightmare repeating itself. And I knew that nobody would believe I hadn't done it."

"You still insist you didn't kill him?"

"I didn't." She looked at me. "That's why I ran for you instead of calling a doctor or the police. I was—I was in a nightmare. As if time had turned back and that was George dead and bloody on the kitchen floor instead of Doug. I needed somebody to help me hang onto reality."

"And I failed you," I said.

"I can't really blame you."

"Why didn't you explain at the time?" I said.

"I couldn't. It wasn't so much because everybody would be sure I'd killed Doug too. I knew the police would find out about George. But I just couldn't talk about it. Whenever I tried to, the words wouldn't come."

"That makes psychiatric sense," I told Coleman and Hutch. "She developed a block, rejecting the fact of two husbands killed in the same way."

Coleman snorted. "Before we get into psychiatry, let's have some more facts. Mrs. Elliott, how did you feel about your second husband messing around with other women?"

"Messing?" Her head came up. "He did stray sometimes, I suppose. But I knew I couldn't do anything about it. I had to take him as he was."

"He wanted a divorce, didn't he?"

"The first I heard of it was when Ben told me."

"Then what were you fighting over? Why weren't you two sleeping in the same bed?"

"He was finding fault with me in everything. And it was his idea to sleep on the daybed." She paused and her mouth quivered. "Of course I suspected that he had fallen in love with another woman."

"Who?"

"I have no idea."

Coleman rose and planted himself in front of her chair. "The fact remains that it was your husband who wanted you investigated."

I said, "I think I can explain that. He made it clear that he wasn't offering to hire me to look for a lover. And he mentioned the possibility of annulment. One of the few grounds for annulment is pre-marital fraud. She'd told him she'd killed her first husband and had been tried and acquitted, but he must have been playing with the idea

that it wasn't the whole story.

"That was where I came in. He wanted me to go to Detroit and dig, and if I came up with information showing her in a much worse light than the story she'd told him, he'd have her on premarital fraud. An annulment would be a lot simpler and less messy than a divorce, particularly as his own love-life couldn't stand scrutiny."

"All right, I'll give you that," Coleman conceded. "But it in no way changes the fact that he wanted to get rid of her. She made up her mind that if she couldn't have him, nobody else would. She'd killed one husband without paying the penalty, so she tried it again the same way. That's the nub of the case—the unusual weapon. Who else would think of using a milk bottle?" He bent over her, raising his voice. "Isn't that the truth, Mrs. Elliott?"

She cringed on the chair, twisting away from him, and her eyes appealed to me. "Ben, you believe me?" It was like a forlorn cry in a wilderness.

"Yes, Lorna," I said.

Hutch's expression showed that he believed her too, or at least pitied her enough to be anxious to believe her, but Coleman was the district attorney and it was his right to keep challenging her. He kept at it for quite some time without getting anywhere, as I had been sure he wouldn't. She had withdrawn back into herself, answering his questions with a quiet yes or no or not answering at all. After a while he gave up.

When she passed me on the way back to her cell, I said, "I'll do what I can, Lorna."

She smiled a very little bit. "Thank you, Ben," she said and moved on.

9

I REACHED THE THEATER DURING THE SECond intermission. Most of the audience was taking in air on the lawn, under a string of soft lights.

"Mr. Helm, one moment."

I stopped. Mrs. Reed was detaching herself from a group of people. She came over to me with a cigarette dangling from her sensuous mouth.

"I hear you're working to save Lorna," she said.

"Who told you?"

"I saw your wife before the show started. She says you're convinced Lorna didn't murder Doug."

I wondered if Greta had said quite that. Though I was convinced now, I hadn't been the last time I had seen her a couple of hours ago.

"Uh-huh," I said. "The way I figure it, the killer tried to frame Lorna."

"You have evidence?"

"Enough to satisfy me."

"You mean it was Lorna's lover?"

"No. Doug was murdered not because somebody was in love with Lorna, but because somebody was in love with him."

"But who?"

"Living next door to them, I thought you might have an idea."

Reflectively Mrs. Reed plucked a bit of tobacco from her lower lip. "But if, as I hear, Doug was going to divorce Lorna, why would this other woman kill him?"

"I didn't say it was necessarily a woman."

She looked up at me sharply in the half-light. "You mean a man in love with a woman who loved Doug?"

"Let's say a variation on that theme."

Just then the buzzer sounded, calling in the audience for the third act, and people milled toward the entrance. Mrs. Reed stood with her head down. I said, "Well, Mrs. Reed?" and she straightened and said, "I'm with friends," and moved to join the people she had been with a couple of minutes before.

I told myself that later tonight or tomorrow morning I'd have to get her aside where we could talk.

Again, as last night, I stood at the rear of the theater to watch the play. And again Alice Brick also stood, but this time she didn't have anything to whisper to me. Marvin Dillson did as well as could be expected in Doug Elliott's role.

The play ended. I drifted out with the crowd and sat down on one of the benches scattered about the lawn to wait for Greta. I had just about finished loading my pipe when far off a woman screamed.

I was off the bench and running through the crowd that had been streaming toward the parking field and which had now stopped frozen in a kind of collective alarm as other women's screams joined the first woman's. Then some other men were running along with me, past and between the parked cars under floodlights, and behind one of the cars there was a group of people forming a dazed, horrified, semicircle between the rear of the car and a woman lying motionless face-down on the hard ground.

There was a lot of blood, but that wasn't why her hair was red.

A middle-aged man, a stranger, bent over her. I crouched on the other side of the woman and he looked at me over the bloody skull and said, "I'm a doctor. She's dead." And he pointed to a rock as big around as a baby's head, and the floodlights glinted on the redness that stained it, and he said, "That must have done it. Murder!"

A woman screamed again, briefly, and was silent, and now there were familiar men pushing through. Abbott Fowler gasped, "Ben, who is she?"

"Cora Reed."

"I don't think I know her."

"Never mind. Call the police." I looked around. "Otto, Marv, all the men from the theater, keep the people back."

Then I stood up and my teeth clamped so hard on my dead pipe that I almost snapped the stem.

10

THIS SECOND MURDER SUBDUED THE DISTRICT attorney. He looked and sounded less sure of himself, and in the hours that followed he didn't once jab his finger at me.

"Guess we need Ben's help," Clem Hutch said grimly, and Coleman merely shrugged and made no protest when I came in on the questioning.

Once again Abbott Fowler's little office beside the stage was taken over, and by ones or twos city cops brought in possible witnesses. Everybody connected with the theater in any capacity was questioned, as well as the girl and her boy friend who had stumbled across Cora Reed's body on the way to their car, and the two couples from town who had been sitting with her during the first two acts and had been standing outside with her during the second intermission, and whoever else could be found who had been to the show and had seen her there. Toward morning

there was nothing else to be done and we knocked off.

Hutch dropped me off at the bungalow. I had sent Greta home in the car after she'd been questioned briefly and pointlessly. But she hadn't gone to bed. She was waiting curled up in a chair, and when I came in she looked at me.

"Nothing much," I told her.

"I've coffee ready." She went into the kitchen to heat it and came out and said, "At least they'll have to release Lorna now."

"That fool! At the end he came up with a theory that the two murders mightn't be connected."

"Coleman?"

"Uh-huh. He's scared. He has to make a show of having somebody in jail, so he's hanging onto Lorna."

I went to wash up. When I came out of the bathroom, Greta was pouring coffee. We sat down at the kitchen table.

"I hear Mrs. Reed was killed during the third act," she said.

"I make it about the time the third act curtain went up. The people she was with said she never returned to the theater with them after the intermission. She went partway with them—I saw that much myself—but she disappeared, they said, before they reached the entrance." I stirred my coffee. "Something I'd told her a minute before sent her off to be killed."

"Darling, you mustn't say that."

"All right, let's say something I told her sent her off to have a word with the killer. My idea was that her aim was blackmail: I must have had that little old woman in Buffalo on my mind. But Clem Hutch insisted that Mrs. Reed wasn't the kind. Strictly honest and pretty well off. Besides, Clem pointed out, there's nobody around with enough money to make blackmail worthwhile. He's right."

I drank.

Greta said as she refilled my cup, "If she was killed during the third act, that clears everybody in the cast."

"Everybody who was on the stage every minute of the act, and you were the only one. But . . ." I let that hang and reached for the sugar bowl and said, "I think . . ." and didn't finish that either.

Greta was a good wife; she knew when to keep her mouth shut. She let me have silence for my thoughts. I got up and prowled the living room.

After a while she said, "Are you coming to bed, darling?"

"No. You go."

At dawn she came out of the bedroom in her nightgown. I was sitting low on my spine, sucking on my pipe.

"Then you know who it is," she said from the doorway.

"Know?" I put aside my pipe which tasted stale and sour. "If only I had one concrete bit of evidence."

She went back to bed and presently I dozed off in the chair.

She was in the kitchen when I awoke. It was after ten o'clock. I stretched my cramped muscles and ran my hands through my hair.

"I'm going out," I said.

"Without breakfast?"

"I couldn't eat."

Her black eyes rested somberly on me.

"Then you found the evidence?" she whispered.

"Not exactly. But Mrs. Reed didn't have evidence either."

I kissed the back of her neck and left.

11

THERE WAS THE SOUND OF HAMMERING IN the theater. I looked in and saw both Bricks at work. Alice was getting ready to sweep the floor by pulling up the seats, and Otto was on the stage nailing down a loose edge of the metal trough that held the footlights.

I strode up the aisle toward Alice. She straightened and said, "Good morning, Mr. Helm," and leaned against the back of a seat. Her thin sweater let the ripe eighteen-year-old figure call stridently for attention.

The hammering stopped.

I didn't answer her greeting. I advanced without shifting my eyes from her pretty face. I stopped at the head of the row of seats and said, "Doug Elliott wanted to divorce his wife so he could marry you."

She opened her mouth and closed it, and I no longer had any doubt.

"That's why he was killed," I said.

Stillness lay over that vast and empty room as she watched me in wordless terror, and I was very much aware of Otto crouching over the footlights with a hammer in his hand.

"The other night you asked me if I was jealous of Elliott making love to my wife in the play," I went on. "I wasn't, but you were. That was why you spoke of it; it was on your mind and in your heart. That was why, even after he was dead, you told the district attorney you had seen him make love to Greta, or so you thought. You were still jealous, and you still hated her. With a guy like that, who couldn't keep away from any pretty woman, you must have had plenty to hate."

Alice found her voice. "Nobody else meant anything to him. I was the one he loved. He was going to marry me."

"Uh-huh. He was old enough to fall hard for a lush, young beauty like you. I imagine he tried to get you without marriage, and when he couldn't he was ready to go the whole way. But why did you keep it from the police?"

Otto was coming down from the stage. His feet sounded heavily. She glanced at him and then said, "I was afraid they wouldn't understand."

"Why not? It was logical you wouldn't kill the man you loved and who was willing to divorce his wife and marry you."

"I know. But I didn't want trouble."

"Did your father tell you to keep your mouth shut?"

She turned her head again to glance at him coming up the aisle, the hammer swinging at his side. Then she said to me with a kind of desperate urgency, "His wife killed him because he loved me."

"No, Alice."

"She killed her other husband too."

"How do you know?"

"I–I–" She touched her throat.

"You learned it from Elliott. I suppose he told you he was going to hire me to find out if there were possible grounds for an annulment because of what had happened in Detroit a couple of years ago. And who did you tell, Alice?"

"Leave the girl alone," Otto said thickly. "She didn't do nothing."

I stepped to the middle of the aisle to give myself freedom of movement. "That's right, she didn't," I said. "But you did."

Alice moaned.

Otto stopped within half a dozen feet

of me. His mustache was very limp, drooping past the corners of his sad mouth. "What did you say, Mr. Helm?"

"You had no use for actors," I said, "and even less for this particular actor. Alice assured you he wasn't just playing around, that he wanted to make it strictly honorable as soon as he could divorce his wife or get an annulment. And she must have told you how he planned to do it, by digging into what had happened to his wife's first husband. But even the promise of marriage didn't make him any easier to take. He wasn't your idea of a son-in-law, was he, Otto?"

His voice was dredged up from deep within himself. "That Doug Elliott, he was no good. I have nobody but my daughter. She's all—everything. He'd ruin her life."

"So you killed him," I said. "Probably she threatened to run off with him if you acted up. So you took steps to stop him."

The hammer dangled along his leg. It wasn't a milk bottle or a rock, but it could do the same sort of job.

I went on speaking to him without looking at the silent, stricken girl on my left. "You didn't only kill him. You tried to cover yourself by killing him the way you had heard from Alice Mrs. Elliott had killed her first husband. In other words, frame an innocent woman."

"Oh, God, no!" Alice moaned.

I couldn't bring myself to look at her. Perhaps she had suspected her father as the murderer and that had been why she had kept from the police that she was the one Elliott had loved. I doubted that she had actually known until now when her father listened to me and made no denial. I hated doing it this way, but there was no help for it. Because now, in front of her, he was at his weakest, with his defenses down.

"But it didn't end there," I said. "Last night, as Mrs. Reed started to go in for the third act, she saw you and followed you to the parking field and talked to you about the murder. I'd told her, among other things, I was sure Lorna Elliott wasn't the murderer and that had started wheels turning. She probably knew about Alice and Elliott; it was her hobby to know about such goings on.

"I doubt that she accused you of the murder. She wouldn't have been so reckless, but scandal was her life and she couldn't resist at least prodding you, trying to find out more. And you went berserk. Because you thought she knew more than she did—that living next door to the Elliotts she had seen you come and go the night before last. So you picked up a big rock and you—"

Alice shrieked as the hammer went up to strike, as he must have raised the milk bottle and the rock. But I was watching and I was ready. My gun came out of my jacket pocket—the .32 automatic which I had taken out of the metal box behind the spare tire in the trunk of my car.

"Hold it, Otto!" I snapped.

He stood there, poised with the hammer raised, and suddenly his craggy face showed that he no longer gave a damn about anything. He dropped the hammer and slumped into an aisle seat that hadn't yet been raised by Alice—slumped like a tired old bundle of clothes.

And in that empty silence his daughter wept. THE END

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